

Regional Oral History Office
The Bancroft Library

University of California
Berkeley, California

University History Series
Department of History at Berkeley

Nicholas V. Riasanovsky

PROFESSOR OF RUSSIAN AND EUROPEAN INTELLECTUAL HISTORY,
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, BERKELEY, 1957-1997

With an Introduction by
Reginald E. Zelnik

Interviews Conducted by
Ann Lage
in 1996

Since 1954 the Regional Oral History Office has been interviewing leading participants in or well-placed witnesses to major events in the development of Northern California, the West, and the Nation. Oral history is a method of collecting historical information through tape-recorded interviews between a narrator with firsthand knowledge of historically significant events and a well-informed interviewer, with the goal of preserving substantive additions to the historical record. The tape recording is transcribed, lightly edited for continuity and clarity, and reviewed by the interviewee. The corrected manuscript is indexed, bound with photographs and illustrative materials, and placed in The Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley, and in other research collections for scholarly use. Because it is primary material, oral history is not intended to present the final, verified, or complete narrative of events. It is a spoken account, offered by the interviewee in response to questioning, and as such it is reflective, partisan, deeply involved, and irreplaceable.

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Professor of history

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Recollections of family and education in Russian emigré communities of Harbin and Tientsin, China; emigration to United States, 1938, and education at University of Oregon, Harvard, and Oxford, as Rhodes Scholar; WWII service; teaching at University of Iowa history department, 1949-1957; marriage, family, Russian Orthodox Church, interest in sports; professor of history, UC Berkeley since 1957: discussion of departmental governance, hiring and promotion of faculty, reaction to campus unrest in 1960s and 1970s; service as chairman of the Department of History (1967-1969) and chairman of Graduate Council (1970-1973); teaching and research and writing in Russian history and culture; visits to the Soviet Union and Russia.

Introduction by Reginald E. Zelnik, Professor of History, UC Berkeley.

Interviewed 1996 by Ann Lage for the Department of History at Berkeley Series.

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UNIVERSITY HISTORY SERIES LIST	

PREFACE TO THE DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY AT BERKELEY ORAL HISTORY SERIES

The Department of History at Berkeley oral history series grew out of Gene Brucker's (Professor of History, 1954-1991) 1995 Faculty Research Lecture on "History at Berkeley." In developing his lecture on the transformations in the UC Berkeley Department of History in the latter half of the twentieth century, Brucker, whose tenure as professor of history from 1954 to 1991 spanned most of this period, realized how much of the story was undocumented.

Discussion with Carroll Brentano (M.A. History, 1951, Ph.D. History, 1967), coordinator of the University History Project at the Center for Studies in Higher Education, history department faculty wife, and a former graduate student in history, reinforced his perception that a great deal of the history of the University and its academic culture was not preserved for future generations. The Department of History, where one might expect to find an abiding interest in preserving a historical record, had discarded years of departmental files, and only a fraction of history faculty members had placed their personal papers in the Bancroft Library.¹

Moreover, many of the most interesting aspects of the history--the life experiences, cultural context, and personal perceptions--were only infrequently committed to paper.² They existed for the most part in the memories of the participants.

Carroll Brentano knew of the longtime work of the Regional Oral History Office (ROHO) in recording and preserving the memories of participants in the history of California and the West and the special interest of ROHO in the history of the University. She and Gene Brucker then undertook to involve Ann Lage, a ROHO interviewer/editor who had conducted a number of oral histories in the University History Series and was herself a product of Berkeley's history department (B.A. 1963, M.A. 1965). In the course of a series of mutually enjoyable luncheon

¹The Bancroft Library holds papers from history professors Walton Bean, Woodbridge Bingham, Herbert Bolton, Woodrow Borah, George Guttridge, John Hicks, Joseph Levenson, Henry May, William Alfred Morris, Frederic Paxson, Herbert Priestley, Engel Sluiter, Raymond Sontag.

²Two published memoirs recall the Berkeley history department: John D. Hicks, *My Life with History* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1968) recalls his years as professor and dean, 1942-1957; Henry F. May reflects on his years as an undergraduate at Berkeley in the thirties in *Coming to Terms* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987).

meetings, the project to document the history of the Department of History at Berkeley evolved.

In initial discussions about the parameters of the project, during which the varied and interesting lives of the history faculty were considered, a crucial decision was made. Rather than conduct a larger set of short oral histories focussed on topics limited to departmental history, we determined to work with selected members of the department to conduct more lengthy biographical memoirs. We would record relevant personal background--family, education, career choices, marriage and children, travel and avocations; discuss other institutional affiliations; explore the process of creating their historical works; obtain reflections on their retirement years. A central topic for each would be, of course, the Department of History at Berkeley--its governance, the informal and formal relationships among colleagues, the connections with the broader campus, and curriculum and teaching at both the graduate and undergraduate level.

Using the Brucker lecture as a point of departure, it was decided to begin to document the group of professors who came to the department in the immediate postwar years, the 1950s, and the early 1960s. Now retired, the younger ones somewhat prematurely because of a university retirement incentive offer in the early nineties, this group was the one whose distinguished teaching and publications initially earned the Department of History its high national rating. They made the crucial hiring and promotion decisions that cemented the department's strength and expanded and adapted the curriculum to meet new academic interests.

At the same time, they participated in campus governing bodies as the university dealt with central social, political, and cultural issues of our times, including challenges to civil liberties and academic freedom, the response to tumultuous student protests over free speech, civil rights and the Vietnam War, and the demands for equality of opportunity for women and minorities. And they benefitted from the postwar years of demographic and economic growth in California accompanied for the most part through the 1980s with expanding budgets for higher education. Clearly, comprehensive oral histories discussing the lives and work of this group of professors would produce narratives of interest to researchers studying the developments in the discipline of history, higher education in the modern research university, and postwar California, as well as the institutional history of the University of California.

Carroll Brentano and Gene Brucker committed themselves to facilitate the funding of the oral history project, as well as to enlist the interest of potential memoirists in participating in the process. Many members of the department responded with interest, joined the periodic lunch confabs, offered advice in planning, and helped find funding to support the project. In the spring of 1996, the interest of

the department in its own history led to an afternoon symposium, organized by Brentano and Professor of History Sheldon Rothblatt and titled "Play It Again, Sam." There, Gene Brucker restaged his Faculty Research Lecture. Professor Henry F. May responded with his own perceptions of events, followed by comments on the Brucker and May theses from other history faculty, all videotaped for posterity and the Bancroft Library.¹

Meanwhile, the oral history project got underway with interviews with Delmer Brown, professor of Japanese history; Nicholas Riasanovsky, Russian and European intellectual history; and Kenneth Stampp, American history. A previously conducted oral history with Woodrow Borah, Latin American history, was uncovered and placed in The Bancroft Library. An oral history with Carl Schorske, European intellectual history, is in process at the time of this writing, and more are in the works. The selection of memoirists for the project is determined not only by the high regard in which they are held by their colleagues, because that would surely overwhelm us with candidates, but also by their willingness to commit the substantial amount of time and thought to the oral history process. Age, availability of funding, and some attention to a balance in historical specialties also play a role in the selection order.

The enthusiastic response of early readers has reaffirmed for the organizers of this project that departmental histories and personal memoirs are essential to the unraveling of some knotty puzzles: What kind of a place is this University of California, Berkeley, to which we have committed much of our lives? What is this academic culture in which we are enmeshed? And what is this enterprise History, in which we all engage? As one of the project instigators reflected, "Knowing what was is essential; and as historians we know the value of sources, even if they are ourselves." The beginnings are here in these oral histories.

Carroll Brentano, Coordinator
University History Project
Center for Studies in Higher Education

Gene Brucker
Shepard Professor of History Emeritus

Ann Lage, Principal Editor
Regional Oral History Office

¹The Brucker lecture and May response, with an afterword by David Hollinger, are published in *History at Berkeley: A Dialog in Three Parts* (Chapters in the History of the University of California, Number Seven), Carroll Brentano and Sheldon Rothblatt, editors [Center for Studies in Higher Education and Institute of Governmental Studies, University of California, Berkeley, 1998].

INTRODUCTION by Reginald E. Zelnik

Nicholas V. Riasanovsky, a Russian-European American

It is no easy task to introduce Nicholas Riasanovsky, a man who is widely and wisely considered the world's leading authority in the field of nineteenth-century Russian history, one of the leading authorities in any sub-field of Russian history whatever, and winner of the American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies special Award for Distinguished Contributions to Slavic Studies. To make matters worse (or at least more difficult for me), as his various publications on Fourier, Lamennais, and English and German Romanticism reveal, his vast scholarly breadth extends westward from Russia to include France, Germany, England--any European area whose intellectual history impinged on that of Russia. Though born in Harbin, China, Nick (as he is known to friends, colleagues, and those of his students who have earned the Ph.D.) could well be described by a phrase (once used to describe a noted Slavophile thinker)--"A Russian European." But that would not fully capture him, for as of age fifteen, as he describes in his interviews, Nick's Russian-European traits began to be absorbed into an American persona that (at times) would make him almost unrecognizable to other Russian Europeans, those who lacked his intimate exposure to and romance with the United States. The transplanted Russian-European teenager quickly pushed new roots deep down into American soil, and the adult, the "new man," that emerged was a unique combination of old- and new-world elements.

Because I have read virtually all of his published work (and that's a lot!), and having been his colleague in the Berkeley history department for over thirty-three years, I may be in as good a position as anyone to confirm what is already well known: Nick is a brilliant, enormously productive, and very original scholar, a wonderful teacher (of his colleagues as well as his students) and--despite a publication list that should be the envy of most historians--a modest man. He is an intellectual, with an open and inquiring mind, sensitive to fresh new approaches, even those that go against his own rather traditional grain. But rather than dwell on his widely acknowledged scholarly achievements (a complete bibliography of his publications through 1992 is available in Russian History, Vol. 20, 1993, pp. 237-263), I would prefer to say some words that may help the reader to envision Nick as a human being, including a teaching human being.

Nick has always had his own special way of doing things. Here is my best recollection of our first meeting in his office (3311 Dwinelle Hall, then as now) some three and a half decades ago, when I was still a starstruck Stanford graduate student making my initial contact with someone who was already a towering giant of the field. Nick ("Professor

Riasanovsky," then), as I recall, spent a lot of time looking out the window as we spoke, a habit that is with him still, but it was soon clear that he was giving me his undivided and friendly attention. Then as now, barring a scheduled class or appointment, it was virtually impossible to be asked to leave Nick's office, in part a reflection of his natural politeness, in part because he so enjoys good conversation. Nor is such conversation restricted to scholarly and academic topics. Nick engages with colleagues and students on all kinds of subjects--current politics, religion, personal matters (and the personal and familial problems of his colleagues and students always concern him deeply), and sports (to which I will return). And, as readers of the interviews will see for themselves, he is particularly in his element when he recounts, as he often does, one of the myriad personal anecdotes, always amusing but often very serious in intent, that are so readily at his disposal. I may be one of the few people who has heard them all, by now, some (such as the tale of the professor who called him an "Anglo-Saxon") more than once. (Here I must confess to not letting on, at times, just for the pleasure of the moment, that I heard him tell the story before.) Nick's anecdotal style is also unique, one of its salient features being his own hearty laughter at his own stories, which he genuinely enjoys each time he tells them.

I mentioned sports, and here we have one of those American features he absorbed so readily and so fully. Nick is a fanatical sports fan, and I don't mean soccer or rugby, but good old American sports such as football, baseball, and basketball (which he played in college inter-murally), the three biggies. He is an unfickle, fanatical fan (here Nick would twit me gently for the redundancy) of all three Cal teams, and attends the games with greater regularity, rain or shine, than any other professor I know. In a typical blend of old- and new-world styles, he attends the games in full dress, by which I mean jacket, tie and, unless the heat is sweltering, overcoat. He can tell you whatever you want to know, and a few things that you may not, about records, batting averages, or the complex rules of the game. Nick's remarkable memory stands him in good stead with sports information as it does with historical fact (I doubt if anyone could ever beat him at Jeopardy with the category "Russia"), language, and, most impressive of all to me, poetry, which bubbles up to his lips, seemingly from nowhere, in three different languages.

Nick has shown incredible devotion to his present and former students, who honored him with a special *Festschrift* on the occasion of his seventieth birthday (it is the same volume of Russian History cited above). His weekly meetings with graduate students at the "Café Riasanovsky" (find it if you can!) have become a legend. His commitment to students' well-being, from admissions, to fellowships, to job placement, is total. He is a generous critic of his students' and his colleagues' work and an unremitting yet unintimidating corrector of any errors in their Russian, down to the missing little *miagkii znak* (soft

sign). Though he never fails to point out "mistakes," Nick rarely writes a strongly negative book review (though he accepts more requests for reviews than anyone I know). He receives his colleagues' criticisms of his own draft writings graciously, without, of course, adopting all or even most of the suggestions offered. He abides our idiosyncrasies and eccentricities, as we accept and enjoy his, and I can think of no more than one occasion in recent years when he was truly angry at any of us. Lunching with him--and I imagine I've done this over 600 times by now--is always a pleasure. One of his delightful little habits is to wait until he sees what I will order and then to order exactly the same dish. Another habit, one for which I admit I have less sympathy, is to order sherry with his meal, though lately we have both been sticking to burgundy. One of our oldest shared customs, perhaps of interest to cultural anthropologists, is to treat each other to a drink whenever a graduate student whom one of us directed lands a job. The thesis supervisor foots the bill. (I believe this is the first time that this strange, exotic practice has been publicly revealed. I hope that students aren't shocked!)

I cannot close this little essay without mentioning Nick's deep devotion to his wonderful family. His love for wife Arlene and children John, Nick, and Maria is absolute, and, unlike many others, he is able to talk about his children's fine achievements with measure, though not without pride. His deep devotion to the memory of his parents, Russian intelligentsy of the first order, is highly visible in the pages that follow. I am confident that readers will sense these and other aspects of Nick's liberal personality and moral sensitivity in the interviews that follow, parts of which constitute a mini-history of the sometimes embattled Russian history wing of our profession.

Reginald E. Zelnik
Professor of History
UC Berkeley

Berkeley, California
September 1997

INTERVIEW HISTORY--Nicholas Riasanovsky

This oral history with Nicholas Riasanovsky, leading scholar of Russian and European intellectual history and professor at Berkeley for forty years, was the second undertaken in the Department of History at Berkeley oral history series. His name was suggested as a potential interviewee early in our planning for the series. Recently retired, but reappointed for three years as a Professor of the Graduate School, he was still involved on campus but had time for the project. Moreover, all agreed that his unique personal background, eminence as a historian, thoughtful reflections on his time and place, and a delightful ability to recount vivid, illustrative, and amusing anecdotes all made him an ideal candidate for an oral history interview.

Professor Riasanovsky was persuaded to participate, and we were introduced over lunch at the Faculty Club in spring of 1995. I recognized him as a familiar figure in both the hallways of the history department and the stands of the basketball arena and the football stadium, where he was always perfectly attired in a dark suit or sports jacket and usually accompanied, at basketball games, by his wife, Arlene. His football seats were close enough to mine for me to observe his habit of bringing to the game, neatly folded, the previous week's sport sections from local newspapers and studying them keenly during brief breaks in the action of the game. This habit was only an indication of his powers of concentration and enviable work habits. (See seventeen-minute rule below.)

My preparation for the interview began by conferring with Professor Riasanovsky's colleague in Russian history, Reginald Zelnik, who at that time was chairman of the department. Zelnik's suggestions, along with those of other colleagues, and Riasanovsky's article, "On History, Historians, and an Historian" [Russian History 15, No. 2-4 (1988)], set out many of the themes elaborated on in these interviews: his birth in China to a family of Russian intellectuals (his father was a renowned Russian historian and his mother a professor of literature who became a prize-winning author in the United States); his unique early education, including learning three languages natively; his emigration to the United States in 1939 and studies at the University of Oregon and Harvard, and Oxford as a Rhodes Scholar; his experiences in World War II and his abiding interest in the "absolute evil" of Nazism. Also to be explored were his devotion to books, to history, philosophy, and to several literatures. And, of course, his major historical works, his perspective on the study of Russian history, in the Soviet Union and the United States, and his many visits to Russia from 1958 to the spring of 1996.

His colleagues inevitably commented on, and his oral history displays, his vocation as a teacher, his respect for individual students and their way of working, and his devotion to their well being. I was also prompted to explore his style of writing history, which was legendary--no computer, and no need for one: his first draft is always his last. His work habits are also legendary: prodigious reading, seven major books published, along with innumerable book reviews and journal articles. He learned as a youth during a serious illness of his father, he relates, that he could accomplish important work if he had seventeen minutes at a time to devote to it.

Other major themes for the oral history pertained to the life and governance of the Department of History and the campus from the mid-1950s to the present. Of particular interest are his descriptions of the appointment and promotion process in history at Berkeley and the work of the Graduate Council, of which he was a leading member on campus and then systemwide over a twenty-five year period. He also has an instructive perspective on the richness and privilege of American higher education in general, and the University of California system in particular, from World War II to the present.

After a planning meeting, at which my preliminary outline was filled out with his suggestions and approved as to grammar and punctuation, interviewing began on February 7, 1996, continuing on a weekly or bi-weekly basis for ten sessions, the last on April 10, 1996. We met in his office in Dwinelle Hall, lined with books and journals on Slavic studies in several languages, including rare volumes from his father's library and all the publications resulting from dissertations he has supervised.

From this scholarly bastion, he looks out a north-facing window at the flowering trees of the campus, the evidence of the felicitous climate he so appreciates and credits for "at least one more book than I would have written otherwise." From his window, he can hear the loudspeaker announcing Cal baseball games, a signal to put the books aside and head for Evans Field on springtime afternoons.

Our ten interview sessions became increasingly enjoyable, as Professor Riasanovsky warmed to me as an audience for his ironic comments and amusing stories. More than once he declared that our enterprise was devolving into a series of anecdotes. But the reader of this oral history will appreciate that his colorful tales are gems of insight into people, politics, and culture, characterizing perfectly, for example, the Oxford philosopher Isaiah Berlin, the imperious old-guard Berkeley Professor Robert Kerner, and the political climate of Moscow in 1958.

The processing of the interview recordings from tape into type presented the challenge of transmitting the lively conversational

speech--rich with ironic asides and punctuated with laughter, occasionally mistranscribed because of the typist's unfamiliarity with the Russian accent--onto the written page in a way that faithfully represented the speech and the speaker. The resulting transcript, lightly edited, was then sent to Professor Riasanovsky. He reviewed it carefully and asked his wife and graduate research assistant also to review it. Minor corrections were made, but there were no substantive changes to the transcript. The tapes of the interview are available for listening in The Bancroft Library.

The Regional Oral History Office, on behalf of future scholars, would like to thank Carroll Brentano and Gene Brucker for having the inspiration for this series on the history of the Department of History and for persuading historians to submit to being the subject of historical study. We also thank Reginald Zelnik for writing the fine introduction to the memoir and for his advice and counsel on the project. Our greatest thanks are to Professor Riasanovsky himself, for the time and thought given to recording his oral history. His words from the 1988 article cited above seem apt in a way he did not foresee when he wrote them: "As I grow old I am increasingly impressed by another characteristic of history, namely, in history as a bid for the survival, for a time, if not for eternity, of the events and record of the past, and with them, of the recorder himself."

The Regional Oral History Office was established in 1954 to record the lives of persons who have contributed significantly to the history of California and the West. A major focus of the office since its inception has been university history. The series list of completed oral histories documenting the history of the University of California is included in this volume. The Regional Oral History Office is a division of The Bancroft Library and is under the direction of Willa K. Baum.

Ann Lage
Interviewer/Editor

Berkeley, California
November 1997

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

(Please write clearly. Use black ink.)

Your full name NICHOLAS VALENTINE RIASANOVSKY

Date of birth December 21st, 1923 Birthplace Harbin, China

Father's full name VALENTIN ALEKANDROVICH RIASANOVSKY

Occupation professor Birthplace Kostroma, Russia

Mother's full name ANTONINA FEDOROVNA RIASANOVSKY

Occupation writer, professor Birthplace Luhchitsy, Ukraine

Your spouse ARLENE SULEGEL RIASANOVSKY

Occupation librarian, professor Birthplace Maynard, Mass

Your children John Nicholas Riasanovsky, Nicholas Nikolai Riasanovsky, Maria Nicolle Riasanovsky

Where did you grow up? Harbin and Luhchitsy, China; Eugene, Oregon

Present community Berkeley

Education B.A. U. of Oregon (1942), A.B. Harvard U (1947)

A. Phil. Stanford U. (1949)

Occupation(s) professor

Areas of expertise European history

Other interests or activities religion, athletics, many kinds of cultural events, travel

Organizations in which you are active U.C. faculty organizations

and clubs, parish, the Patriarch Athanagoras Byzantine Institute, Rhodes Scholars' Association, etc.

I FAMILY, YOUTH, AND EDUCATION IN CHINA

[Interview 1: February 7, 1996]##¹

Father, Historian and Legal Scholar Valentin Riasanovsky

Lage: I want to learn something about your family and your early childhood. So let's start with your parents and a little background on their lives.

Riasanovsky: My first impression is that there is so much to say, and one doesn't know where to begin, and one doesn't know what to stress. And I suppose what I'll say will be the kind of summaries that one writes of people.

Lage: We want to know about your parents and the things about them that are most important to you, to your development.

Riasanovsky: Well, that might be asking too much [laughter]. About the family, both my parents are Russian, both are intellectuals, indeed both were at one time or another professors. I was born in China in Harbin on December 21, 1923. My mother [Antonina Fedorovna Riasanovsky, pen name Nina Fedorova] had left Russia shortly before the revolution; my father [Valentin A. Riasanovsky] in the process of the revolution, in the civil war years. He did not participate in the civil war on either the Red or the White side. He was a professor and a teacher and in some sense moved east as the situation developed. I suppose he was lucky to survive as so many were. Of course, many did not survive. He was in Yaroslavl on the Volga during the famous Savinkov rebellion, when the city was taken and retaken several times. On one occasion--I

¹This symbol (##) indicates that a tape or a segment of a tape has begun or ended. A guide to the tapes follows the transcript.

think they were sailors checking and they looked at his passport, and his passport had his official rank. In Russia, all universities were state universities--or almost all--

Lage: So this made him an official of the state?

Riasanovsky: Yes, at a certain rank. And the ranks, by the way, sounded enormously impressive because they were put there at the time of Peter the Great, in translation from foreign languages, sounded like privy councilor or whatever, and one sailor just looked at it and didn't understand much, so he asked another one, "What does this mean?" The other said, "What are you doing?" My father said, "Teaching." "Teacher, friend." He slapped him on the back. They went on. Others were shot.

Lage: Oh, my goodness! But your father wasn't political? Or was he?

Riasanovsky: He was enormously interested in what was happening, but no, he was not at all a political figure. He was always primarily a scholar, even when he had some high other positions. Actually, he was a Soviet subject until he became an American subject. He was both a legal scholar and lawyer and a specialist in history and other things, especially Oriental fields, such as Mongol law and the customary law of the nomadic tribes of Siberia, Chinese law. And he had a high position as a legal advisor to the Russian and then to the Soviet railroad. But he would not go back to Russia.

Lage: You mean when he was in China he had this position as an advisor to the railroad?

Riasanovsky: Yes. Also he was head of the university of--more specifically it was called the Juridical Faculty in Harbin, but it had several departments such as economics and law. However, very wisely he did not return to Russia. He was also invited to the University of Tokyo; he didn't go to Japan, he came to the United States.

The Juridical Faculty was an interesting joint enterprise of various kinds of Russians and Chinese, and I suppose partly because of his great ability to head things and be with people they wanted him as head repeatedly, so he stayed. One story he told me, one of the students was Rodzaevsky, the leader of the Russian Fascist Movement. He was hanged after the Second World War in Russia. When he was registering, he was asked what his occupation was, and he said, "Secretary of the Russian Fascist Party," and one of the professors said, "I do not know what that means." He

said, "Well, Mussolini is the secretary of the Italian Fascist Party, and I'm secretary of the Russian Fascist Party." [laughter]

So you have a highly intellectual environment. I don't have the exact months, I may miss some things, but I think I read three languages at the age of five and proceeded to read big books from the beginning, with such special interests as Christian heresies and utopian movements. Later I wrote a book on Charles Fourier.

Lage: And this was an early interest of yours as a child?

Riasanovsky: Yes. I had an excellent Russian encyclopedia, and that's where I read about most of such things.

One very prominent intellectual who was in Harbin too was Ustrialov, who made the mistake of returning to Russia and disappeared in the purges.

Lage: Did your parents ever entertain the idea of returning? Was it talked about?

Riasanovsky: Well, they were Russian, and I don't recall talking about it, but I think both had a very clear vision of what the Soviet system was. And there were also people who had returned, and almost no one survived.

Lage: Why had your mother left when she did? And were they married in Russia?

Riasanovsky: No, they were married in China. She told me this interesting thing which makes her one of the few, I suppose, in that she saw the revolution coming. Her father had died, she had a younger brother to support, and she took a teacher's job in Harbin. She had gone to the university at St. Petersburg, the famous Bestuzhev courses for women.

Lage: And her brother came with her?

Riasanovsky: Yes. She never was a Soviet citizen because she left Russia before. And you also had to apply for it [Soviet citizenship]; she never did that. So I also had no citizenship until I became an American citizen. Her brother, by the way, later returned to Russia and disappeared in the purges.

Lage: Living and being born in China didn't make you a citizen there?

Riasanovsky: No, not in China, no. I'm not quite sure of the situation, but I think also to be a Soviet citizen you had to make an appeal, and it did not come automatically. It was never done in my case.

Life and Learning in Harbin, 1923-36

Riasanovsky: The city of Harbin was a very interesting city, of course. It's not clear whether it had more Russians or Chinese; it had over a hundred thousand Russians. It's not clear partly because of where you draw the boundaries. So in some sense, you see, in terms of how much Russian there was in the city, it was similar to being brought up in the Russian environment.

Lage: Were the Russians in their own enclave?

Riasanovsky: No, it was not an enclave, it was their city. They built it, but there was an adjacent Chinese city, called Fudidian. It doesn't mean the Chinese lived only there, but in that sense there was a geographic distribution, so to speak.

We always lived well. Generally, my life was never very poor or short of food, or whatever. My father had this position with a car and a chauffeur to drive around and so on.

Lage: You had a governess?

Riasanovsky: I had a governess, teachers--much private education. So in that sense it was a very privileged life.

Lage: Did your mother continue to teach?

Riasanovsky: Well, yes, she continued for a while. She also went to an American YMCA [Young Men's Christian Association] college before we came to the United States. For both my parents English was not their first nor their second language. I suppose my father knew a number of languages; he spent most of his time in school on classical Greek, which was a famous part of the classical gymnasia of Imperial Russia. He was a very good student, so whenever there was an inspector coming, he had to recite irregular Greek verbs. If you think that's simple, you can spend a lifetime on irregular classical Greek verbs; they're mostly irregular. I learned some Greek later at Oxford.

Lage: But that wasn't part of your early education.

Riasanovsky: No. I learned quickly some Latin with my father. And in school of course, the subjects were in both English and Russian.

Lage: Now why English?

Riasanovsky: It was an American school. It was the YMCA school in Harbin.

The first language I learned to read and write, however, was French, with my governess. With this early beginning, I cannot tell today which I'm reading of those three languages --Russian, English, or French--until I stop and think.

Lage: It's just that natural.

Riasanovsky: Because, I suppose, I think in them as I read them. But with all the others, I know very well, for instance, when I'm reading German, or Italian even, which is an easy language, but learned late, and to me always it is modified French [laughter].

Lage: Were you the oldest child?

Riasanovsky: I had one younger brother, Alexander. In addition, I had a cousin, Maria, who was slightly older than I was. She was the daughter of my mother's sister; Maria was with us during the years in Harbin, but later remained with her own family, when we went first to Tientsin and then to the United States. The years in Harbin were 1923 to 1936; the years in Tientsin were 1936 to 1938.

Lage: Why did you make that move?

Riasanovsky: Because the railroad was sold to the Japanese. The Japanese came in 1931. I remember because of the location of our home; we had a fine house on the way to the cemetery. I saw more dead people, more corpses on that occasion than in three years of war in Europe.

Lage: In '31 was that?

Riasanovsky: Yes. Because the Japanese would toss bodies of Chinese onto the open carriages which we saw going by.

But the railroad was sold somewhat later. We also, of course, by that time wanted to leave--again, I'm grateful to my parents because they didn't go back to Soviet Russia or to

Japan. In 1938 we went to the United States. I must say that it's easy to remember the exact date because those were the days of Munich. And on the ship, which was the Empress of Asia, a British ship, they were all the time wondering if they were at war or not. We didn't know of course immediately that [Neville] Chamberlain gave in at Munich, and there was no war.

Lage: But soon.

Riasanovsky: But the days were very memorable.

Lage: I want to get a little more if we can about the community in Harbin.

Riasanovsky: For one thing, of course, I remember its diversity. In some sense, the Russian community, as I said, was very well developed, although very strongly divided in the sense that there were Soviet establishments; there were White Russians, and these in turn could be divided, but as I say it was in some sense a Russian city.

Lage: But those political divisions occurred in Harbin as well--

Riasanovsky: Of course. In my school, for example, the American YMCA school in Harbin, there were, I suppose, over 50 percent Russians; there were also quite a few Chinese and also members of other nationalities.

It's interesting that in this setting I did not learn Chinese; most Russians didn't, even though one of my father's fields was Chinese law. I did meet Chinese scholars, and I did acquire a high regard for Chinese culture. Later, for example, when I went to a private school in Tientsin, we went on a vacation to Peking and I saw the temples, etc. So in that sense I, of course, had an appreciation of China. At the same time, I suppose the Chinese I met most were servants and those that drove rickshaws and so on.

Lage: What about the schoolchildren? What kind of social background did they have?

Riasanovsky: I would guess high middle-class to very rich. I mean, for the Chinese; for the Russians more mixed.

Lage: Was there interplay between the two groups in school?

Riasanovsky: Yes, yes, certainly in sports. That's when I came to like basketball.

Lage: Way back then?

Riasanovsky: Well, it was an American school that had basketball teams and so on. In fact, the top team had an All-American Russian from the University of Michigan, Mikhailov, as their captain and coach. Although I should also say that most of my English was English and not American, because the teachers happened to be English.

Lage: So you had a British accent.

Riasanovsky: Yes. And then I became an American, and I went back to Oxford. In any case, one obvious thing here, of course, is that it was very much an intellectual background. What that does is that it is all completely assumed, you know, and when people talk how wonderful it is to be a professor, well, you see nothing wonderful in it, but it's simply the way things are.

Lage: Right, it's what you do.

Riasanovsky: I remember one of my--I don't want to mention the name--but a very good doctoral candidate who later became a professor; she was worried that if she gets a doctorate, what will be left for her son? [laughter] This sort of thing did not worry us.

Lage: It didn't worry your father, it seems.

Riasanovsky: No. I suppose there were high demands, you see. I remember one of the early disappointments in my life was when I learned that my mother did not know Turkish. And that was one of the shocks--

Lage: You mean because you thought she knew everything?

Riasanovsky: Right. And I even to this day, perhaps, have a special respect for people who do know Turkish [laughter].

Lage: Now, did your parents take an active interest in your education and your reading? Or did you kind of just explore the library?

Riasanovsky: Well, both. We had a very good private library; you still see some of it in this room. I must say that I do not think that they explicitly and actively pushed me, but they let me do what I wanted. They taught me many things; I suppose my best knowledge of history comes from my father, my best knowledge of literature comes from my mother. And as I said,

Latin I learned with my father because we weren't given it in school. (It was an American school.)

But the point is that it came very naturally, and I would say the best thing about it is that I do not feel that I was under any strain. I do not necessarily recommend it to others; you sort of do what you want. I also, of course, did read on my own--I'm sure my parents did not prescribe Christian heresies and utopian socialist views; that came from the encyclopedia. So in some sense both.

Lage: Did the family have dinner together?

Riasanovsky: Yes. My father did work long hours, of course. But we did have dinner together. Russian dinner comes at three or four o'clock, usually. But all of it wasn't necessarily an exceptional thing; for instance, Professor [Peter] Boodberg--one of my colleagues here--in his family they spoke a different language every day of the week. That's how they kept seven languages going. And of course the end of it was that he wound up as a linguist, with some strange theories [laughter].

Lage: It is quite an advantage, though.

Riasanovsky: I don't have seven, I have three languages I feel at home in, but it makes sort of a qualitative difference whether--for example, I write a book on Fourier, which is based on French sources, or a book on the emergence of romanticism in England and Germany. Of course, the German parts are based on German sources--it really makes all the difference in the world, how much more at home I am in French as compared to German. Languages should be learned earlier.

I suppose there was also insecurity; in this sense again, perhaps, fitting for our world, because of course the Japanese came, the selling of the railroad, there was considerable crime--

Lage: Did the crime get worse over time?

Riasanovsky: It did get worse over time, but there were many variants of it.

Lage: How did the Japanese impact Harbin?

Riasanovsky: They established of course a satellite, if you want to call it that, a puppet government of Emperor Pui of the last Chinese ruling family. That's all well-known. But in fact,

they were the bosses of it. They did not impact our family directly because we were not engaged in any necessarily anti-Japanese groups or whatever, but they were quite obviously in charge of everything. Also, later when we were in Tientsin, the war started in a major way in Shanghai and in other parts of China. So I think the impact, at least toward the existing Harbin community, was destructive because the economic situation became worse, and a great many people left. The end process was the Chinese-Japanese war, the Communist victory in China, cultural revolution, and I'm told now in Harbin there are half a dozen Russians instead of over a hundred thousand. The overall impact was obviously quite destructive, although in very different formats--so to speak --with Japanese or Chinese Communists. I repeat, I think I'm very lucky to come out of it all as I did.

Lage: Was there talk for a while in your family about where you might go?

Riasanovsky: Well, yes. At first they thought--it was a brief idea, perhaps--they would send me to the University of London when I finished school. My mother's younger sister--or half-sister more exactly--her father died and then her mother remarried--was in England. She had married an English naval person. You see, in some sense, we never looked at Harbin as our home or as where our ancestors were. Of course they were not. And compared certainly to the United States, it was a much more tense and much more unpredictable situation.

Lage: So that's something you were aware of.

Riasanovsky: Yes. In a sense, I suppose this makes for proper training in our world.

Lage: That's true.

Riasanovsky: My mother liked to tell the true story of the Russian general departing for war and saying, "Of course, war is unpredictable, but I know one thing: if I die, the emperor will take care of my family." [laughter] That seemed to be the greatest security.

A Progressive School in Tientsin, 1936-1938

Riasanovsky: You wanted to talk about my education. Of course, I finished what we should call high school education in Tientsin from '36 to '38 in a very interesting and extremely effective school, a Russian school known as the Bartascheff School--by the name of the director. It was very progressive and--

Lage: What do you mean by progressive?

Riasanovsky: I mean that it was individual: you could go as fast as you could. You could almost select whatever you wanted. (The director was a scientist.) That's why, you see, I was fourteen and ready for college, together with home education. It was small also; by its very nature the school couldn't be large.

Lage: How large?

Riasanovsky: I think the total school would be about fifty people. But that would be from age seven to seventeen or eighteen. So it was mostly individual instruction, passing examinations, etc.--

Lage: And this mainly Russian students or all Russian students?

Riasanovsky: There were some Chinese, but again, for those who had learned the language. The instruction there was in Russian, although other languages were taught as languages. That's of course interesting because Tientsin was in no sense a Russian city. There were Russians there, but the concessions were British, French, and Italian, and this meant their particular municipalities, armed forces, etc.

Lage: Each with their own separate--

Riasanovsky: Yes.

Lage: And then how did the Russians fit in? How did your family fit in?

Riasanovsky: Well, we lived there, which was simple enough.

Lage: Which area did you live in?

Riasanovsky: In the British concession. My father continued his scholarly work.

Lage: Was he teaching there?

Riasanovsky: No, we were already sort of thinking of going on, and of course we did go to the United States. So there were the two or three years in Tientsin, and this was better than other schools because literally you could do all you want and as fast as you want. I sort of developed in that kind of a system.

Lage: It sounds as if you were highly interested in your studies, from the early years.

Riasanovsky: Yes. And without any question and without any need to justify the ideas--is this intellectual, is it real, or whatever? That I consider a great blessing, although of course it was also good in our family that neither my father nor mother looked down on any people or taught any kind of hatreds. In that sense, I was fortunate with my family.

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Lage: We talked a little bit about your reading in your parents' library as a child. Tell me more about that, what you were reading, how your father and mother and governess guided you. Did you attend school regularly throughout?

Riasanovsky: No, not throughout. But I attended for several years the American school and then for two or three years Bartascheff school in Tientsin, which was a very unusual school, as I said, and for me very desirable.

Lage: But some years was what they now call home schooling?

Riasanovsky: In the beginning, for example, I learned French, I learned it at home with the governess, and I know that I learned to read English, perhaps in school, I am not sure. Russian certainly at home, so I think home education is extremely important here, in every way.

Lage: In the progressive school, what were the areas of study?

Riasanovsky: Actually, what I did was study very much history, etc.

Lage: Was there science?

Riasanovsky: Science, too. I was probably well prepared in that, too, because the director was a scientist who did experiments of some sort. Also mathematics; but there was great flexibility

and I read and was very well prepared in world history itself.

Lage: It sounds as if at this age of fourteen when you finished high school, you probably were more widely read than a lot of college graduates.

Riasanovsky: Oh, certainly. Again, you know, I do not think that somehow intellectual life is greater than other kinds of life, and I also think it shouldn't be confused with religion. But still an abiding impression which is very strong, is how much time people waste and how poorly they're trained in our great country. There are some counterbalancing points; for example, we do try to send everyone to school. Even now, but certainly until recently, much smaller percentages would be in colleges in countries like Great Britain or France or Germany. But generally we are remarkably uneducated.

Lage: Now you've mentioned the word "balance," and I know that's come up in other conversations we've had. What were your other interests other than your studies?

Riasanovsky: Well, one interest was sports. I went into soccer at that time, in school I was on the basketball team. Each class had a basketball team, so it was not any special achievement. But from then on it sort of became my pastime on the weekends and so on.

Lage: Is that something your parents took an interest in?

Riasanovsky: No. But again, you see, they quite allowed me to go and in that sense sponsored me.

The Russian Orthodox Church

Riasanovsky: I always went to church, and that again became and is a very important part of my life.

Lage: Yes, I wanted to ask you about that. Is there more to say about church? Was that an important part of the Russian community's life?

Riasanovsky: It was. Again, there were different jurisdictions, there were different approaches. I had a wonderful grandmother--my mother's mother--who was the most religious member, I suppose, of our family.

Lage: So she was also with you there?

Riasanovsky: Yes. She did not come to the United States or even to Tientsin, but she was sixty-something, and looked so old.

Lage: Well, when did she come to Harbin? With your mother?

Riasanovsky: I think somewhat later, actually. With the civil war and starvation in Russia, of course they were very bad days. I remember she told the story of how--again, moving east--always going to church. She went to confession; the first thing the priest asked her: "Did you kill anyone?"
[laughter]

Lage: [laughter] I guess that was a good question at that time.

Riasanovsky: Very good question. But it shows sort of the circumstances.

Lage: As a child, what do you remember about the church experience?

Riasanovsky: What I remember about the church experience is the liturgy and the church services. And this is the essence of the church and is in a sense the validation of the church. Of course church can do and should do many other things, but it's not primarily a social organization or a way to mix. I am always unhappy with, "Should services be in Russian? Should they be in English?" I approve Russian and Church Slavonic, although there's also an argument for Russian as against Church Slavonic. My church service is Church Slavonic, but English services are wonderful, and, you see, both are translations. It's not originally in either language.

Lage: Were your parents also religious?

Riasanovsky: Mother more than Father; Father more in his last years, and also apparently in his earlier years because they were an intellectual family, but apparently if you go further back it would be a clerical family. You know, of course, priests marry in the Orthodox church--they can also become monks and then not marry. When I talk to my Catholic friends, there's sort of a long face. I also believe there was a medieval saint in our family, so you see it goes far back. In some emigré groups, they associate the church with nationalism, etc. All this I'm much against. Of course, you can read about it in my books on the Slavophiles and so on.

Lage: But was that something you experienced personally?

Riasanovsky: Yes. It's simply a very much higher level which doesn't depend on nations or ethnic groups. I often remember a couple of things that sort of emphasized it: first of all, I remember, for example, a very fine priest in this country--a monk from one of the great Holy Land monasteries--when I was attending the church in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, where services were in Arabic, so I prayed to Allah for several years, which is of course the Arabic word for God. And not only is it the Arabic word for God, but in the Arabic language you cannot use any other. We say Lord, Master, and so on. I remember we had a church supper, and he asked me, "What kind of people are these Protestants?" [laughter]

Lage: [laughter] And what did you say?

Riasanovsky: I don't remember [laughter]. You recognize the difficulty of it. But you know people speak of Russia, the third Rome, and there again in Cedar Rapids, we were having a church supper--there were only two people of non-Arab origin in the congregation, another Slav of some kind and myself--and one old Arab said, it was about November, that he's going next month for Christmas to his home town in the Old World. I said, "What's your home town?" He said, "Bethlehem." So much for your Third Rome [laughter]. As you know, Bethlehem is an Orthodox city; it always was.

Russian Jews in China, and Anti-Semitism

Lage: Were there Russian Jews in Harbin?

Riasanovsky: Yes, many.

Lage: Had they left after the revolution or before?

Riasanovsky: Both. In fact, I think that Harbin was a good place for them in more ways than one because there were no restrictions on Jews of any kind, because it was not part of the Russian empire. I've had Jewish friends from the beginning, and it wasn't an issue.

I would say here also that--well, actually, anti-Semitism is a very important, very difficult phenomenon. Remember once I told you if I could be a Buddhist and have many human lives, I would spend probably one of them trying to figure it out. So I don't want for a moment to minimize it, but it's quite wrong to say simply that Russians are

anti-Semitic, on several counts. One is that there were no Jews in Russia for a very long time--or almost no Jews--until the division and partitions of Poland in 1772, 1793 and 1795.

And for instance, in my environment it would have been a great moral crime to be anti-Semitic. It was the general stance of the Russian intelligentsia, in part because the government did have restrictions on Jews and the intelligentsia was against the government. But I would also say that if I meet an educated Russian--and I stress educated--who is anti-Semitic, he's almost certainly from the Southwest. Of course, that's where you had the greatest Jewish community in the world. This is the community that perished in Auschwitz. So you see it's partly regional, partly social, and in the case of Harbin and my family, it was not a problem.

I did not meet anti-Semitism that I recognized at least--perhaps I missed something--until I was in the American army. And there something came up about the Jews, and I would always argue against anti-Semitism. Then when we were in Normandy--not on the front lines--they said that there's a church. Who wants to go to the service? The church was Catholic--it was St. Nicholas' church--and I said that I wanted to go to the service. They said, "Well, are you Catholic?" I said, "No, I'm not Catholic, but I'm Orthodox. It's very close to it. The church is my saint's," and they said, "Well, that means you are not Jewish." I said, "No, I'm not Jewish." "You mean all this time you're defending the Jews and you're not Jewish?!" [laughter]

Lage: What an experience.

Riasanovsky: Yes. But until then I simply never encountered it.

The Family and Thoughts on Religion

Lage: Did you have Jewish students in your YMCA school?

Riasanovsky: Yes. Jews were often professional men--doctors, etc. Here I should really refer to my mother's books because she was a writer, and her best-known book was *The Family* [Boston, Little, Brown, and Company, 1940], which won the Atlantic Monthly prize. I've had so many interviews on *The Family* that--but the point is it's very much a Russian community, in this case in Tientsin. When it was produced on Broadway I

think the title of the play was *The Boardinghouse in Tientsin*.

Lage: Oh, really? Now, I've heard about the book, but I didn't know it became a play.

Riasanovsky: Yes. It was not successful as a play, but it did become a play.

Lage: And did you go to see it?

Riasanovsky: No. It didn't run very long, and somehow--I'm sure I didn't, and I don't think even Mother did, although she did go east sometimes. The first point I must make about the play is that it was not our family.

Lage: That's what I wondered.

Riasanovsky: Yes, for example, I told you we were never poor or certainly not very poor, but could have been because Father became very ill shortly after we came to United States, but then Mother won the Atlantic Monthly Prize. But the book is authentic in the sense of reflecting the community. For instance, perhaps one of the more striking characters there is a Jewish doctor. You know, I have observed it closely, creative writing is creative writing. It's never exact reality. So it is always wrong to say, "This is he." But at the same time what you see in life affects your writing, and in that sense I knew that doctor, although he was not the same doctor, and so on. And that's one of my reflections on the Jews.

Lage: Did your mother write while she was in China, or was this--

Riasanovsky: No, she taught. It's interesting that it's written in English, which she learned rather late. I'm glad to say that she made also the Russian translations.

Lage: She did the Russian version also.

Riasanovsky: Yes, later.

Lage: But she wrote it in English.

Riasanovsky: Yes, well, as I say, she went to college in Harbin. It was published in twenty languages, and recommended by the Japanese Ministry of Education as proper morals for our young people and other such distinctions. It was not published in the Soviet Union. It was published in Russian in Germany by emigré sources, and finally when it was published as the

Soviet Union fell I think 150,000 were bought up promptly. But when the publication was announced, I was horrified for a moment because I thought, What if they translate? Probably poorly, from the English. But they were more intelligent than that, and they got a copy of her own translation published in Germany; then I relaxed.

Lage: And is there a son in this family?

Riasanovsky: Yes, more than one. And a grandmother, again, and many others.

Lage: But did you recognize your own family there?

Riasanovsky: No. It is much more clearly some other people I know. Well, yes and no. For instance, I recognized some of the aspects of Grandmother in the grandmother, and yet others are quite different.

Lage: Well, that's the way creative writing works.

Riasanovsky: Oh, sure. The trouble is that some people don't understand that.

Lage: So you must have had a lot of questions like this.

Riasanovsky: [laughter] Yes.

Lage: Do you want to say more about those early years or your educational experiences? I'm kind of intrigued by the Christian heretics and the utopian movements--your interest in these things.

Riasanovsky: My grandmother always took me to church, and it started then and has stayed since.

Lage: So it's an ongoing interest, not just--

Riasanovsky: Oh, sure. I have said before that Nazism is about the worst thing that happened to the world. Again, I shouldn't really talk five minutes on something that deserves five volumes. Our civilization has basically today Christian and Judaic--couldn't have a New Testament without the Old Testament--system of values. It's a typical process that values accepted or even imposed, driven, are originally religious and become secularized. And I think in some sense we now live in the afterglow of those values. How long it can keep up, I don't know.

Lage: You mean without the religious connection to them.

Riasanovsky: Yes. As told by Father Florovsky, a famous figure and a representative of the ecumenical patriarch in the World Council of Churches, there was a social ethical committee on what role the church should play in the world, and it was worded as follows: "What is the proper hope of the Christian?" And there was silence, and then Karl Barth, the great theologian, said, "The only hope of the Christian is the Second Coming." [laughter] There's much truth in that.

Languages, a Continuing Family Tradition

Lage: Did you continue your family's tradition with your own children--did they learn languages at an early age?

Riasanovsky: Yes and no. My wife, Arlene, who was from Iowa--now it's University of Northern Iowa, then it was Iowa State Teachers College, then on to graduate school at Columbia University in librarianship and in U.S. history--is not of Russian origin. As I think the terminology goes, she is a real American. [laughter]. Actually, of course, real Americans come in different sizes and shapes. For example, she's a marvelous cook, and I met many Americans who are excellent cooks--real Americans--although in Europe the idea persists that our cooking is bad. Her mother was a teacher and was born here, as was her father, but her family is of German origin. The family name is Schlegel, and she still remembers German songs, etc., but not Russian. So we did not speak Russian at home, needless to say. I did teach Russian, to some extent, to all the children. Arlene also learned some; the key point was when John--our older son--said something in Russian, and she looked up, and he said, "Mama ne ponimaet"--"Mama doesn't understand." [laughter].

I think I told you the most wonderful story on children and language, that our daughter--the one who is a historian and, I should say, the most religious member of our family--we sent her to this--I'm sure it still exists--sort of University of California preschool associated with our department of psychology.

Lage: As a nursery school?

Riasanovsky: Yes, preschool. It's a pain in the neck because I think to the end of her days every three years they'll come and say,

"What are you doing?" [laughter] But there she went, and then I got a very excited call: "Do you realize what happened? She invented an alphabet." Of course, it was the Cyrillic alphabet.

Lage: Oh, they didn't recognize what she was writing?

Riasanovsky: No, and I spoiled it. I said, "Many people use it," instead of what I should have said, "Oh, how wonderful," and I wonder at what high level they would have discovered what it was. [laughter] And I could say that the alphabet was invented twice--the Chinese, for instance, never had it--once in the Egyptian-Phoenician environment and the second time by Maria [laughter].

Lage: Well, that's quite a distinction for your daughter.
[laughter]

Riasanovsky: Yes, I spoiled it, as I said. So I tried. It had some good results, though of a different kind. Maria, I suppose she's good in languages--her French is native. We spent some time in France. Her Russian is very good but could be better. Because she speaks so well she says that time and again she gets caught because people immediately assume she's Russian, and there is no problem. Then she doesn't understand the next sentence. But she knows it. She has also learned Latin, German, and Italian since, Latin from a very good Berkeley High teacher.

John--the first, older son--learned quite well. Again, we had this problem--should they be different, or should we impose a foreign language--but they loved it. And the payoff was when we had a prosperous plumber family across the way with six or whatever children, and they served as babysitters. One, age fifteen, would be there until seven o'clock, then the older sister would come. Once I was approaching our home, and then I heard this huge plumber roar at his wife, "Why is it that this little boy speaks two languages and our children can't speak even one?!" [laughter] Later John went on an exchange for a semester to Leningrad; it's interesting that when he came home, I asked him--when I picked him up at the Oakland Airport--"What do you remember most?" in Russian. He said, "Strakh v glazakh liudei"--"Fear in the eyes of the people." And that's correct.

Lage: When was that that he went?

Riasanovsky: Oh, about nineteen years ago. It's correct because, you see, I saw a lot of fear, even in China, and certainly in the army. And he never had.

Nick, the second son--the problem there was that when we started Russian, we went to France. His French was very interesting because we decided to send him to a French school rather than French-American with special classes and so on. And we went for a year, as we usually did, and I would spend several months of that year in Russia, the family would stay in France, Arlene would visit me--in any case, had we left in the middle of that year we would have said it had failed. It was preschool. He generally is not talkative; he said nothing. There was one strange episode--we went to a soccer game; he's also a sports fan, or sports nut, as Arlene sometimes says--it was very strange because he started speaking as we left the house. He spoke for two straight hours--in English. I realized that he hadn't said a word all week [laughter], so this was his one chance. I also could see him in front of the mirror sort of gesturing or whatever. And then, in January, he came in and said in French, "Now I'm going to speak French," and he spoke it perfectly.

Lage: Oh, my goodness. So he had just been taking it all in.

Riasanovsky: Yes. The teachers came, and they were so impressed and surprised. The older son also--he took a test worth five hundred points and got five hundred points. So you see it worked in that sense. But one of the funny things is that Nick's Russian suffered--he knows some Russian--because of the French. One of the stranger things is his pronunciation in Russian is French--"trois" for "three", he says in Russian "tri," but with the rolling French pronunciation of the r. The funny part is that's what Tolstoy's family had a problem with. Apparently he decided at some point there are two r's: the English r and the foreign r, and he uses the foreign r for foreign languages.

Lage: What field of history is Maria pursuing?

Riasanovsky: French history in the nineteenth century. And I said, she has been learning languages steadily, but I'm very much in favor of learning them early. It's so easy early, so natural.

Then we have people here, for instance, one question which is always a painful question, it keeps recurring, it will never go away, is--sometimes quite a bright person comes

in, a graduate student, who says that he is thinking of switching to Russian history.

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Riasanovsky: The next question is "How much Russian will I have to know for Russian history?" And there's only one answer: as much as you have to know English for American history. You cannot do it overnight, but that's how it is.

Lage: That must limit the people choosing Russian history. It can't be an easy language to learn.

Riasanovsky: Oh, it does. No, it isn't. Well, of course, people also learn Arabic and everything else; it can be done. But it is a very serious concern, and one of the things I dislike most, and it was said about my books as well as other books: "The best thing in English." The answer to that is translate it into Portuguese and it will be better. And it's a very funny thing that I cannot use this example again, because I have a new colleague, Yuri Slezkine, who knows Portuguese. So I have to think of some other language [laughter].

Lage: Turkish, maybe.

Riasanovsky: The way he learned Portuguese is also wonderful. He is from the Soviet Union, and he wanted to get out of it, and they needed people in Angola and Mozambique. So he learned Portuguese and then skipped ship, I guess.

Emigrating to the U.S., 1938, and the Fate of Those who Returned to Russia

Lage: That's a good tale, too. Shall we talk about how you happened to come to the United States?

Riasanovsky: Yes. As I say, it was one of the best decisions of my parents, and I suppose from what I said it is obvious that one had to leave China. There is no one left in China from the community I knew.

Lage: Now?

Riasanovsky: Yes.

Lage: But didn't a number of them stay on further?

Riasanovsky: Yes, but even by the time--1938--it was not difficult to tell the war would be coming. My father was very fortunate in that he was a very well-known scholar, but opportunities would be much worse in China. You know even that saying opportunities--survival may be a better term.

Except that the United States, of course, is a most attractive country, there was no special connection. We had some friends in Eugene, Oregon; that's where we came to, through British Columbia.

Lage: Was it difficult to get permission to immigrate?

Riasanovsky: I think not. I don't know the details, you see. But I think that if you were a professor and so on, you could be in the category of those who would be admitted. Although frankly I don't know, for example, how early they applied. Perhaps they waited for some years for all I know. Quite fortunately the decision was against going to Russia; that would have sort of been right in the Great Purges.

Lage: Well, were they actively considering going to Russia at that time?

Riasanovsky: Father was asked many times, but I don't think he ever came close--

Lage: He was aware enough of what the situation was.

Riasanovsky: Yes. And I suppose there is one debt in my life which I'll never repay. [Nicholas] Ustrialov, a very prominent intellectual--also a Soviet subject, citizen, at the same time as my father, and a brilliant professor--but who was connected with all kinds of ideological and political movements. He believed the Soviet Union would become real Russia; it's all part of intellectual history, it's not just my private story. I remember the day he was leaving for Russia. He was a very handsome man in a blue shirt and a bow tie. What I did not know--later I was told--was that he had left a thousand American dollars with my father to return to his sons if needed. A thousand dollars in 1933--[laughter]. But of course he was one of the first people to disappear, because of extreme suspicions of the time--he knew the Soviet leadership personally--for instance, he wrote in Pravda that Bukharin edited. And he and his wife and his children totally disappeared, so you see that's the money I never returned.

Lage: What kind of communication was there with people who went to Russia?

Riasanovsky: It depends, but basically, in some sense, none. During the purges, for example, one admiral was sent into a gulag camp because the British admiral sent him a Christmas greeting remembering their service during the war. So it was that kind of attitude--it was best not to communicate. But in this case, it wasn't simply no communication; we now have documents that almost all were sent to labor camps, very many perished. Ustrialov was shot. These people were suspect, they had been in a foreign world, and even if they had ties with Communists, these Communists themselves were being purged. Some people survived after twenty or so years in the camp; but as to communication, that's a sad story.

For instance, eventually my cousin and her parents went to Russia. That was after the Second World War, when the entire community was evacuated because, for one thing, the Chinese did not want them, and it was clear that they did not want to communicate because that again gives you undesirable ties and so on. She wrote occasionally to my aunt in England--England being better than the United States for whatever the reasoning--and after the Soviet collapse I tried to get in touch with my cousin and couldn't. I don't think she perished in the camp, because it was past that time.

It's a very difficult thing to understand for people who had no such experience. But speaking of how to pass messages, there was a story--true or false, I'm not sure--one group that went back to the Soviet Union--to Soviet Armenia--were Armenians from France. The man said to his relatives in Paris or wherever, if things are all right, I'll send you a photograph of me standing. If they're bad, I'll send you one of me sitting down. And the photograph came, and he was lying down [laughter].

Lage: I didn't realize that so many people returned to Russia.

Riasanovsky: Well, in China perhaps there was a choice to escape to the Philippines or what, but it was not entirely voluntary--the Red Army occupied Manchuria after the Second World War. The first return, the one I referred to, was just before the purges, when so many bad things happened. Also, of course people who were mostly employed by the railroad had directly or indirectly many foreign or other undesirable contacts.

First Impressions of Oregon and American Life

Lage: Now tell me about what it was like to come to Oregon and your reaction to American life. Were you fourteen?

Riasanovsky: Yes. In '38, I was fourteen. The impressions were, again, how rich people are, how much more space there is than there is in China. And how out of the railroad train I saw some of the mountains of Manchuria and so on--it has nature, and even wild nature, but the urban life is very crowded. One thing that is no longer true is that strikingly there were no beggars in the United States. That was how it was.

Lage: And you were accustomed to seeing beggars?

Riasanovsky: Sure, in China, all the time. I remember when many years later I saw a beggar here, and he asked for something, it was both a shock and a kind of a remembrance of things past.

Lage: Of course now we've become accustomed to it.

Riasanovsky: Exactly. I refuse to be accustomed to it, but I guess I am, because we are so incredibly rich compared to this situation. Very many cars--of course there were cars in Harbin, but there were very many cars and gas stations in Oregon. I remember my brother and I were counting them. Oregon is a beautiful state--

Lage: Did you come right to Oregon? You just landed in British Columbia?

Riasanovsky: Yes. Victoria, and then Seattle, and then proceeded to Oregon.

Lage: To what city?

Riasanovsky: Eugene. It was, in a sense, a very positive impression. On schools, the impression was sort of how little people knew. You see, I did not go to school because I already had my high school diploma, but my younger brother did--he's four or four and a half years younger--and it all sort of seemed a joke. People were proud they studied algebra for a year; well, I had years of algebra, although the years were done in months and so on. Again, this has changed, but the feeling was there was a certain ease, and a very attractive world.

I was also very happy with athletics, of course. The first year I was there Oregon won the NCAA [National

Collegiate Athletic Association] basketball championship; that was the first NCAA basketball championship and the only one Oregon has won. But I still remember every player and many of the games.

Lage: The only one they won--you have good timing.

Riasanovsky: Well, that's no disgrace; plenty of good schools have never won a championship, including, let's say, USC [University of Southern California]--in basketball, I'm not talking about football. In football, there is no one clear champion, there are--well, you know all this.

Lage: Did your father have a position?

Riasanovsky: Only briefly. There were various disabilities, then he became very ill. He was paralyzed for a year, and I spent much of that year with him in the hospital, and that's where I think I learned that I can study or even write if I have, say, seventeen minutes. I prefer to have more time, but the point is that saying we've got to get started, you have to finish--and all that takes much time that somehow doesn't exist.

Lage: So if you have seventeen minutes you can accomplish something.

Riasanovsky: Yes, not only something, but some important writing.

Lage: How old were you when that occurred? Were you in the University of Oregon?

Riasanovsky: That's only about a year after we came. Again, I have a very good impression of people; people being kindly. By the way, the busiest people were the doctors. I came to know a great many of them, and they were, those I knew, excellent people--I'm certainly pro- and not anti-doctor--but they were the ones who never had the time. In some respects, they seemed to be killing themselves, so I thought they should have more, better hours--I remember one who was so happy he got to Vienna to an international meeting and had a day to see the museums.

Lage: So you didn't decide to become a doctor.

Riasanovsky: No.. I don't think I have any particular abilities to become a doctor. What happened then is that--although I repeat, I had the best impression of people--it was very expensive, and we would have been very badly off except that Mother won the

Atlantic Monthly prize, and so for a while, you see, she got a lot of money and it was all spent on medicine. I still think in those terms, because for instance, you mentioned Alzheimer's disease. If Arlene or I have that, how much will that cost? I remember recently a colleague's care cost forty thousand a year. So I'm very much in favor of the medical system, but the important thing is total coverage, precisely. For example, I do not like what many insurance policies say, "We pay up to \$3,000." Well, \$3,000 I can very easily pay, but the question is not up to \$3,000 for health care but beyond [laughter].

Lage: Yes, up to \$300,000. Well, did your father recover from this illness?

Riasanovsky: He recovered remarkably in the sense that he was totally paralyzed, and he came back out of it. He was never the same man and did not try to teach, but he wrote books and we continued working on history. His mind, by the way, was never gone.

Lage: What was the illness?

Riasanovsky: It's still not clear. It might have been infantile paralysis. Now, you know, it's unknown, almost, but that was just the turning point when they still could not--

Lage: They couldn't always diagnose it.

Riasanovsky: Yes, and also could not prevent or treat it. In my life, which of course has been now a long life, I guess, many diseases which were deadly stopped being deadly.

Lage: And now they tell us there are new ones coming.



Nicholas Riasanovsky with his parents, Antonina Fedorovna Riasanovsky and Valentin A. Riasanovsky, circa 1926.



Maria, Nick, and John Riasanovsky at John's wedding, July 1991.



Nicholas Riasanovsky with his parents, Antonina Fedorovna Riasanovsky and Valentin A. Riasanovsky, circa 1926.



Maria, Nick, and John Riasanovsky at John's wedding, July 1991.

II THE UNIVERSITY OF OREGON AND WORLD WAR II EXPERIENCES

[Interview 2: February 14, 1996]##

An Aside on Mrs. Hearst and the Weather in Berkeley

Lage: This is our second session with Nicholas Riasanovsky, and today is Valentine's Day, February 14, 1996. Happy Valentine's Day!

Riasanovsky: Thank you.

Lage: Last time we got you to the United States. We talked a little bit about some of your impressions, but I think maybe not enough about what it was like to come from such a different place and culture.

Riasanovsky: Well, looking at this glorious day, perhaps I'll begin out of chronological order, with a story about the only time I met the Regent Mrs. [Randolph A. (Catherine)] Hearst, shortly before the famous kidnapping of her daughter. I suppose it was at the time of a regents' meeting, and I was representing the Graduate Council, at the chancellor's house on the campus. And Mrs. Hearst, a charming person, was trying to say something nice to everyone. But she did not reach me until I was already leaving, and she shot across the room with a magnificent white mink coat--the weather was about like it is today, seventy-five or eighty degrees--and she said, "You're Professor Riasanovsky!" I said, "Yes," and I might have winced because I thought, How long did it take her to learn it? She said, "You know, Professor Riasanovsky, this is what I say. Students come to Berkeley not because of us regents, not because of other students, but because of you faculty." And I said, "Weather also helps," and then we parted. [laughter] Next time she came to my attention was

in connection with the kidnapping. So weather helps a great deal, and we can start on that.

Lage: [laughter] How did you find the weather in Oregon?

Riasanovsky: Marvelous. There's not much difference, though somewhat more rain, but it's western Oregon, don't forget. In eastern Oregon it's beyond the mountains and different weather.

Student Life at Oregon, and Sports

Lage: When you came to Oregon, did you start school right away?

Riasanovsky: Well, we came at the time of Munich [September 1938]; that would be autumn, and I started school in January, the next term. So not right away, but reasonably soon. They did not know what my school was, but the administration said that I deserved a try, and if I make it, I make it, and so I've made it since.

Lage: So you didn't have transcripts and all the usual--

Riasanovsky: I had transcripts from that school, but they didn't know the school.

Lage: Did they make you take any examinations?

Riasanovsky: There may have been some general examination in English and something else for freshmen, but it wasn't difficult.

Lage: What did you find student life and American culture to be like?

Riasanovsky: It was really strange. First of all, I liked it very much. I told you that there was much tension and fear in Harbin and Tientsin, where there was none in Eugene, Oregon. And many people did not lock their doors. It seemed to be also a very rich and a very wasteful life.

Lage: You observed that even as a fifteen-year-old?

Riasanovsky: Oh, certainly. You see, intellectually I was ready for college. Many people were in college without, it seemed, any serious intellectual or other interests, especially then it applied to women. It applies of course less now because women can go more easily into professions and so on. And I

don't want to make too general a statement because there were fine people intellectually too, and I made very fine friends. But it was the kind of easy, country-club style of life that was surprising. I think it's true that at that point at least, and even today, no country has so many people going to college without a purpose as we do. We also have the largest percentage by far of people going to college. I might add that the second largest was Soviet. The curve was: way up, Americans; sharply down, the Soviet Union; still more sharply down, the rest of the world.

Lage: Did you get involved with traditional student life at all?

Riasanovsky: I played intramural basketball and got my only C.

Lage: In intramural basketball? [laughter]

Riasanovsky: Yes. I played for a couple of years. It was in gym courses; it was not varsity. But the point is that the first NCAA year--exactly as I entered college--Oregon won the first NCAA basketball tournament. And the second year when I also played in these games, we had a tremendous collection of tall and able players. I was lucky to get the C, I suppose. I was also playing badminton for the university, but, you see, there great size is less important.

I was more or less invited to join a fraternity, but I declined; it seemed so strange to me and perhaps a little frightening. But in any case they persisted, I still declined. Later I thought that perhaps that would improve their grade-point average right away [laughter]. They had to maintain it because they lost social privileges and so on if it was below 2.4 or some such thing.

Lage: And you would have raised the curve for sure [laughter].

Riasanovsky: That's why this kindly interest in me, I would guess. I went to more or less all the football, basketball, and baseball games. So in that sense that certainly was a part of my life.

Lage: That must have been your first introduction to American football.

Riasanovsky: Yes, and also really to baseball. I saw it once or twice in China played by Americans and others, and I suppose that's perhaps why I like both soccer and basketball the most: because they're the earliest sports I knew. But I came to like American football too. And one thing foreigners should

remember is that actually it's a much more controlled and regulated game than you realize. If you don't know, it seems everyone is hitting everyone else. As you know, that can cost fifteen yards [laughter].

Lage: What attracts you, or did attract you, about this game of football?

Riasanovsky: I generally like athletics. Not all; for instance, I don't know golf and have never played golf, etc. But so many games attract me, and I repeat, I also have a kind of a relationship to games--that is when many ideas occur to me. It is a real rest and real change.

Lage: Almost like a meditation experience?

Riasanovsky: Well, I told you already, I believe, that I talked to Professor [Ernst] Haas--an excellent political scientist we have. I've talked to another member of the department, some joke that we always go to games, and then he said, "Why do you always go to games?" And I mentioned to him [that ideas occur to me during games]. He said, "Of course," that someone else he knows walks in the woods, someone else does something else. But I must say that it's not as perfect as it sounds, because when the game is too exciting I'm not thinking about my books or anything else [laughter]. Football is a very interesting game. Its main weakness when compared to soccer, of course, is that it goes in spurts. You have all the time when the play ends, contrary to soccer and contrary to basketball. But it has great variety and many possibilities; it's a very interesting game.

Lage: You observe the strategies? That kind of thing?

Riasanovsky: Yes.

Looking toward Europe

Riasanovsky: I also wrote for the college newspaper; I think I still have them somewhere, articles mostly--especially, after the war broke out--on international politics and Russia and so on.

Lage: Was there a lot of interest in what's going on in Europe in the college newspaper?

Riasanovsky: Well, obviously when the war started, there was interest, but the paper was somewhat like the *Daily Cal*. The *Daily Cal*, of course, is the most advanced example of the genre [chuckle]. But I suppose that's why they wanted my articles, because really there was very little.

Lage: Were there many Europeans at Eugene?

Riasanovsky: No. There were, of course, some foreign students. The main industry in the area is the lumber industry; it's not directly a link to Europe except by export.

Lage: I don't think of it as a school that had an International House or--

Riasanovsky: Well, they have much more now, but nothing of that sort then. I must say the general attitude was kindly and benevolent. I must say also there were very few blacks, for instance; it was in that sense homogeneous. The issues of affirmative action, etc., are postwar issues, as you know.

Lage: Was there any Russian community in the town?

Riasanovsky: No, not at all. There was one farmer who was Russian, near town, not in town. He had an American wife. We joked for years that Russian was kind of a secret language of our family.

Lage: Did you live at home?

Riasanovsky: Yes.

Lage: And there was no church, of course.

Riasanovsky: No, I went to the Episcopal church occasionally, but there was no Russian Orthodox church.

Lage: Did you have any way to compensate for that?

Riasanovsky: Not really, but I guess I was so well-set earlier that whenever there are Orthodox churches, I go to them.

Intellectual Life at Oregon

Lage: Let's talk a little bit about classes and professors and about intellectual life there.

Riasanovsky: It was very good. Again, you see, I became a professor myself, so I guess I'm prejudiced. For instance, I like lectures; it's interesting although it certainly is not the only kind of instruction, and obviously, for example, if someone is writing a doctoral dissertation it's not the lectures that he needs most, but it's not only a very important aspect, but also very much of our historiography is based on university lectures. For instance, the greatest interpretation of the French Revolution came in the lectures of Aulard, Mathiez, Sorel, and others. It gives a chance to present a complete picture, so I'm much in favor of lectures although, I repeat, it is not the only thing a professor should do.

It was also a good history department. I often mention Dr. [Gordon] Wright as my favorite teacher. He has had a very appropriate distinguished career. Later he went to Stanford, where he became the president of the American Historical Association. He was a very distinguished French historian, a very good man, and a very good person in being with students and helping students. Louise Wright, his wife --they had just married then; she was a graduate student in economics--recently they celebrated their fiftieth anniversary, and I was the only person who was there from that first year.

Lage: He was quite young, then, when he was in Oregon, was he not?

Riasanovsky: He was. He's now retired and not in good health. Recently, at the last meeting of the French Historical Association in Atlanta, there was a session for him, and I presided over the session; various students presented papers. He was very good indeed. In fact, I even had my first university course in Russian history from him. He told me that he did not expect me to come--just to take the exam, of course. I came and found him interesting on Russia as well as in European history in general, where he was a specialist.

Lage: What did you think of his take on Russian history? At least you may have been getting a different point of view from what you might have had previously.

Riasanovsky: Not necessarily a different point of view, really, but good. For a while I taught him Russian; I don't think he learned very much, but he was interested. I admire him, but he once said if he were now beginning he would be in Russian history because it's so much more relevant. I said, "Then there never will be Babylonian history." [laughter]

There were other teachers, good in different ways. As I said, I learned three languages as a child: English, Russian, and French. But I spent many years learning German, which I still know much worse than these languages. I had a good German teacher: Professor Kramer. One of his gimmicks was that he preferred Gothic script to Latin script--of course, the authentic German script was originally also English. He argued that it's easier than the Latin script. So he would write his name slowly in Latin and then quickly in Gothic and say, "Look."

Lage: He didn't convert anyone, I guess.

Riasanovsky: No. During examinations he used to say, "Time marches on."

A Love of Books

Riasanovsky: The faculty was small, although very good. Professor [Quirinus] Breen, for example--who died recently--taught a great many things; I suppose he was a specialist in the Renaissance period. I took reading courses from him in areas where there were no courses; he was extremely helpful. He had a tremendous love for books, and he would assign books and then realize he was assigning too much, and then the next list comes, and he would say, "Well, at least read something in it." That again becomes larger and then there would be still another, and then he says, "Well, at least touch those books." [laughter]

And there are people like that. I might as well, as long as I am on books, tell one of my favorite book stories, and this comes from a later period when I was a visiting professor at Harvard. It refers to Professor Alexander Gerschenkron, one of the, I suppose, most famous scholars of our time--at one point Martin Malia, my colleague here, and I were thinking, who exercised the greatest influence on our generation in Russian studies, and we put him first. He more or less counted his life by books--how many books he has to read. He also calculated when he was going to die--and he died pretty much on time--and how many books he would be able

to read by then. Every book counted. He was reading on an airplane, and there was a lady next to him, and she said something, and he said nothing but kept reading. Finally, the lady said to him, "Don't you notice me?" He still paid no attention. The flight was from Vienna to New York. Then the lady said, "Was it your mother who told you not to talk to strange women?" "No, my father," and went on reading. The plane stopped. It was Marlene Dietrich [laughter].

Lage: Oh, my goodness! He did look up finally. Now do you think this is a true story?

Riasanovsky: I think it is. It fits his life, I mean. He himself got his doctorate in Vienna. I can believe it; of course, it goes against, you see, measuring your life only in books.

Lage: But do you find that you yourself go in that direction?

Riasanovsky: Very much so. Just short of Gerschenkron, though. I don't like reading excerpts; I don't like look-through, take-a-look. I love to read books and books, and I may be presumptuous but I think I never forgot a book I read. I mean, not the entire book--but when people say, "I don't remember if I read this or that," to me it's a very strange thing.

Lage: Well, you have a better memory than some of us ordinary folks.

Riasanovsky: I have a very good memory, but the point is that a book is valuable as a book. I must again say that it is more important in intellectual history, which is my main field, than if I were checking customs in the eighteenth century in Odessa or wherever, because there you have other material and you can't and you don't think in terms of books. In intellectual history, you will very often think in terms of books.

I suppose partly it is both home and Oxford training. Isaiah Berlin, one of my Oxford teachers, when he first went to the United States--he taught at Harvard for a year--he wrote an article about teaching in America. It was a kindly article, because he thought American students were more alive than British students. They were more interested in related fields such as psychology and anthropology. But the criticisms were also good. He said, "Strange people, these American students. They ask not what books to read, but what chapters, and believe it or not, which pages." [laughter] Of course, in some sense he's right; you read books and not

pages. So I was afraid that he will discover the *Columbia Sourcebook* and never come to the United States again [laughter]. He hasn't discovered it, because he has been coming, most recently I think to get an honorary doctorate at Yale.

Professor Breen, again, had this kind of love of books, and we had several other good professors in history at Oregon.

The Eclectic Possibilities of the Study of History

Riasanovsky: One field that I had quite a number of courses in was American history because in that I was relatively weak; somehow it wasn't part of my American school in China, perhaps because I wasn't there at the right grade or whatever. And I also found that very interesting, so I had a very good education. I think it's true that history was better than some other departments. I had a good course in the Department of Economics in the principles of economics. I had a less good course in sociology taught by an enthusiast, a handsome, impressive man, but I remember one statement: he said that before Freud, we didn't know why people behave as they do, and after Freud, we know: they behave like their parents, or the exact opposite, or some stage in between.

Lage: Well, that about covers a wide range of behavior.

Riasanovsky: It does. And he didn't say it as a joke. But social science in many ways is a strange field. I think it's a valid field, although my own impression is that the only thing that can be at all called science in that group is economics. Nevertheless, it's a valid field but, I repeat, a strange field. I remember, for example, talking to a very able--and that's important to emphasize--and intelligent sociologist, a colleague of mine, and we were discussing some sort of a measure in connection with affirmative action or whatever. (I think that the Supreme Court later disqualified that measure, but it was trying to enforce certain things.) He said, "I'm very much in favor of it. Aren't you?" I said, "Well, I don't know. I think I'm in favor of it if it helps things; if it will create more resentment then I'm not, and I am not able to judge." Then he said, "Nick, can you tell me one society where you had, by law, equality and a modern democratic legal system, and then it turned into repression?"

I said, "My dear, Weimar and Nazi Germany." He was Jewish, and intelligent, and yet it was as if it were a complete blank. Well, there are also good things about social sciences and sociologists.

So I think I was in many ways well-prepared--

Lage: Did you know when you entered the university that you were going to study history?

Riasanovsky: That's a good question, but I'm not sure when I decided. I think my other preferred fields would be philosophy, literature--and I suppose if literature, then which literature? But I chose history rather early. Yes, I think I knew it at least from my freshman year. One argument for history that occurs to me is that you can study the other fields very well too. Why not study philosophy as a historian, or whatever? So it's enormously broad and encompassing.

Lage: How about emphasis on the history of ideas? Was that something you settled on early on?

Riasanovsky: Yes, yes. You remember my two main interests from the age of five were Christian heresies and utopian socialist movements [laughter], so I stayed with that.

Even now I tell students that, of course, you have to have a history degree and meet the requirements and, well, at Cal they're not restrictive. Still, you have to meet them, so it should be clearly a dissertation in history. When you have a position and so on, if you are doing research in sociology, people will say, What magnificent cross-fertilization! What a broad approach! So history is, in a sense, everything.

I tend to be generally very eclectic; I like very many approaches, ideas--even though I might disagree with them--I suppose because of their structure, or because of their throwing light on some aspect of the subject. In some sense, it's the opposite attitude from having a clear vision and trying to build a school and denouncing everyone else.

Lage: So you see yourself as an eclectic in approach?

Riasanovsky: I'm afraid I am; I don't know what I see, but--

Fellow Students Treadgold and Delzell

Lage: You had a couple of fellow students in Oregon who went on with history.

Riasanovsky: Yes, there were several, actually. Donald Treadgold was one, Charles Delzell was another, Jerry Callahan, Milton Small--Milton Small could have been another professor, but I remember went to Wisconsin, couldn't find housing, married early, so I think ended up as school principal. He was good enough, I'm sure.

We had a very good student group, again often meeting at Gordon Wright's, so that was a very good experience, and I would say that in that sense I'm very much in favor of such groups. From my own experience, the less formal it is and the more natural, the better.

Lage: But this was something that Wright fostered?

Riasanovsky: Yes. I think we would have met without him, and his wife too, but it was nice to have supper. And not only that, people participated--well, we mostly discussed books we read, or articles, or whatever.

Lage: Now tell me more about Donald Treadgold. You went to three schools with him. Were you the one who interested him in Russian history, do you think?

Riasanovsky: I don't know. My mother and I taught him Russian to begin with, but he was a man of enormous curiosity. I have an article about him, a commemorative article. What I mentioned as his defining trait is tremendous curiosity in everything. Now, as I say in this article, of course we all have curiosity or we wouldn't be where we are. We wouldn't be studying history or other things. But in his case it was simply enormous and a kind of fascination in everything he learned. He learned many languages, for instance he even learned Chinese, getting up at five in the morning--from five to seven or some such hours. There were other traits; he was very much an activist, always wanting answers; as you learn in history there are no answers.

Lage: When you say "activist" what do you mean?

Riasanovsky: Well, he wanted to be a lawyer but couldn't decide between being a lawyer and a historian; he decided in favor of history. He was officer and member of any number of groups,

whereas I generally prefer not to join if I can help it. He always wanted to join, wanted to lead, wanted to have answers. But at the same time, as I mentioned, together with that, he had one of the highest regards I ever met for scholarship and sort of ivory tower scholars.

Lage: So he combined those two qualities.

Riasanovsky: We had roomed together, not in the same room but in the same house at Harvard. So we had very close contact and understanding of each other. And we had all kinds of multilingual jokes and puns, at times bordering on worrisome --I was realizing what he thought before he said it. In that sense, I was close to him. Actually we were also, of course, very different people. He was the only son--I remember when we were flying from Eugene to Harvard, his mother said, "Now Donald, you show Harvard what scholarship is like."
[laughter]

Lage: High expectations!

Riasanovsky: I think he was the first person to receive a university education--his father was a businessman--and certainly a Harvard education. He was unfortunately very sensitive, enormously aware always of what he would do. One of our friends was killed in the war, and he said, "Now what is going to happen? Am I to be the last leaf on the branch?" So he actually is not the person I most admire; at the same time, in some ways he was extremely close to me, and it was an interesting--

Lage: A lot of shared experiences at least. And are you still in touch?

Riasanovsky: Treadgold died, and I have now a new genre in my writing; namely obituaries [laughter]. Delzell is fortunately alive, and we are quite in touch. One thing he does is for some encyclopedia--I can't exactly quote the name--his field is modern Italy. He'll write an annual survey of Italy; I get an annual survey of Italy every year.

These generally were lasting relationships.

The War, from the Oregon Campus

Lage: During these years, we had the war in Europe getting more and more intense. How was it reflected on the campus, aside from your articles?

Riasanovsky: For us, the United States, Pearl Harbor was a thunderbolt--at least one of the persons I knew was killed in Pearl Harbor during the Japanese attack.

Lage: Somebody you had gone to school with?

Riasanovsky: Yes. He was older. A great many were in the army; some were killed. So it was then that it began to affect America very much. Although we were lucky that unless you were in the army--and even then unless you were in the combat part of the army--you were relatively safe.

Lage: But you knew what was coming after graduation for most people.

Riasanovsky: Yes. I'm thinking of several people who were killed, and I suppose that was the most direct impact. I was in the army for three years, but I don't think there were any great shortages of anything in Oregon. There was some talk about it being more difficult to get gas or to get tires, but I suppose that affects more people who run certain kinds of businesses.

From that I can tell you a good story: because there were very few Russians in Oregon, but there were several groups scattered in various places, Old Believers and sectarians, and some miles from us there lived a farmer, Dobrynin, who was a dukhobor. He came to us reasonably regularly to borrow Tolstoy's writings.

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Riasanovsky: --Tolstoy was read as religious literature. Dobrynin had a marvelous farm; everything was in order, everything was prosperous--I was in the army so this was told to me by my parents--and when some things became difficult during the war, as I said, about tires or gas, nothing seemed to affect him. His neighbors said, "Dobrynin, how do you manage that? Why are you so successful?" And he said, "Because of my beard." The other farmer said, "Well, that's very interesting; I should grow a beard. How long did it take you to grow it?" He said, "Sixty-five years." [laughter]

I remember when the war broke out in Europe for example, Gordon Wright was standing at the telegraph bureau looking at the latest telegrams, and so was my German teacher, Kramer. I suspect they were on opposite sides.

Lage: You felt your German teacher had some mixed feelings about--

Riasanovsky: Well, he was German. We didn't discuss it, so--

Lage: Was there any anti-German-American feeling?

Riasanovsky: Not that I know. It was almost indistinguishable. I didn't know of any loud German groups--certainly not in Eugene, and probably not in Portland. I understand from history but also even from my wife's telling me--she's third, or whatever, generation of German origin, from Iowa--that the real anti-German feeling was in the First World War. A great effort was made not to be German, or at least not to show that you were German. As you know, much fear in the West, of course, was of the Japanese and not Germans. Again, there weren't many Japanese at that time in Oregon in general and in Eugene in particular, so I did not see much of it. But as you know, this is very prominent in discussion of the postwar years.

Reflecting on the Absolute Evil of Nazism

Lage: Unless there's more to say about the University of Oregon, we could move into how you happened to get in the army. What was your status?

Riasanovsky: I suppose you mean legally. I had no citizenship until after I got into the army; I became then an American citizen and have been since. I suppose I could have said I wasn't an American and I didn't want to go; it never occurred to me. You asked me earlier, in some conversation, why I considered it a good thing that I was in the army. Because very rarely in history you have such an absolutely evil system as the Nazi. You know history is often a clash between two wrong parties; we insist that someone is right, usually. And here it's almost in some sense, if you will, unhistoric--this sort of blatant way in which Nazism was an utterly disastrous movement.

Lage: And yet there do seem to be revisionist theories of the Nazis.

Riasanovsky: Well, I don't know what to do with the revisionists. In a sense, I suppose there could be many sources for it. One would be simply that they cannot believe it. And you know, that's a very complicated story, and some of my colleagues occupy different views on it, but I believe that this refusal to believe was extremely widespread--it doesn't excuse everything because obviously people in government or whatever should learn. But it's simply a complete inability to accept the horror of it. It also began earlier with so many well-meaning people saying, "Well, once Hitler's in power, he'll moderate his behavior," or "some of it is just propaganda."

I suppose it teaches us some lessons, one of which is that it's much better to be a hypocrite and profess some values than to espouse openly diabolic values.

For example, one of my books is on official nationality; *Nicholas I and Official Nationality in Russia, 1825-1855* [UC Press, 1959], the creed proclaimed for Nicholas I and his system by Serge Uvarov in 1833, which really remained a kind of a belief for the government until 1917. It's easy to summarize in just three words: Orthodoxy, autocracy, and nationality. By the way, I'm deviating, but on purpose. The extent of our secularization is that even good historians--I'd say at least half of them--write "autocracy, orthodoxy, and nationality." This of course is impossible. How can you believe in God and put Him second? In no official document was there ever anything but the right order; orthodoxy comes first. And of course there was serfdom in Russia, etc., etc., etc., so it's easy to say, Well, it's nice to talk about it and say that this is what I believe and this is what I want, and at the same time behave in a horrible manner and so on. But believe me, it's much better than the Nazi system. For instance, you could not have extermination of peoples under official nationality.

Lage: I see what you mean. So even if you don't act on your principles, it's better to espouse them than to espouse diabolical values.

Riasanovsky: I take a very negative view of the Soviet system and always have, but at least its ideal was positive. Presumably all the horrors were, of course, misguided; I don't think things would have worked. But the aim was understandable and desirable. And the Nazi aim was sheer horror.

Lage: Was this something that you felt then; were you aware of this to this extent as an undergraduate?

Riasanovsky: Perhaps not to this extent, but I was sufficiently aware of it. It's kind of logically so. I don't believe in guilt by association: therefore every German is evil. Of course not. But when your very aim is extermination--and I think that after the extermination of Jews, there would be exterminations of Slavs and others--obviously, of course, if (first) Germany won, if (second) it held together, for there was a remarkable element of death and destruction within the movement, so it's entirely possible they would have started killing one another. But if carried out, it's simply--

Lage: They would have moved to another minority.

Riasanovsky: They wouldn't even be a minority, it would be a majority of the planet.

Enlisting in the Army

Lage: So you must have enlisted in the army.

Riasanovsky: Yes.

Lage: At what level?

Riasanovsky: As a private.

Lage: You didn't go to officers' training school?

Riasanovsky: No. Well, that's another thing. Of course, the war affected the universities; ROTC [Reserve Officers' Training Corps] became very large scale, as you know. My three years in the army can be described briefly that I was a private for a year; I was a technician third grade, thus a non-com [non-commissioned officer] for a year; and a lieutenant, an officer, for a year.

Lage: So you moved up.

Riasanovsky: Yes. Not very logically, perhaps; I actually had a battlefield commission with little battlefield, but the division was active and I suppose they needed, for one thing, people who could speak Russian--

Lage: So they did take advantage of your skills.

Riasanovsky: Eventually, yes. I was first in intelligence and eventually in the intelligence section of a division--every division has an intelligence section; I served in the 83rd Infantry Division after going to school, where I was the only person not of German or Austrian origin. You had to know German, but it was tested by examinations. And my greatest abilities are to pass examinations, nothing creative or whatever [laughter]. So I wound up in a fully German and Austrian group. It helped my German, of course.

It's really very interesting: one of the sad reflections is that many were young German Jews--in fact, that was the largest group--who came to the United States several years earlier and were lucky, of course, to come. But as you know, many German Jews escaped. These six million Jews killed were mostly Polish or Ukrainian. They [the German Jews] had a tremendous regard for Germany and a complete disdain for American culture. You couldn't have better German patriots. Again, it's only this ideologic and racial doctrine that put such people on our side. They were mostly from New York.

Lage: That's very interesting. I wonder how long this disdain for American culture remained as they became more acculturated.

Riasanovsky: I have some very good army friends, but not from that group especially. I have Jewish friends--Lewis Bloom, for example --but American Jews. He happens to be very religious--Jewish. He frightens me a little because he says he can talk to God. So he has criticisms of our society, but not from the above angle.

Lage: Tell me more about the war years for you.

Riasanovsky: In the intelligence section of the division, the main interest is to know what German units are at our front or nearby. There are several people in a group dealing with that. There are several sources of information. One very important source is the information from above. You get intelligence reports from corps, army, etc., headquarters. Another source of information is prisoners, or people who come over. Again, there was a group interrogating German prisoners; I wasn't part of that group, and logically so. I don't really speak German. There were also whatever documents or whatever other information falls into your hands. The main point is to know who is ahead of us and who is shooting at us.

One interesting aspect of this occupation, in my case, turned out to be thousands of Russians we recovered from the Germans--the Russian Liberation Army, so-called, or whatever --who came over, of course, very willingly: why should they fight for Germans? In one case, we had 2,000 in front of us and 3,000 came over [laughter]. But that is, you see, when I came face-to-face for the first time with Soviet people and the Soviet system. I never had any illusions, but it's still quite unforgettable.

Lage: So were you involved in debriefing these people who came over?

Riasanovsky: Yes. Again, the first point for debriefing would be to find out how many guns are around the hill. But beyond that, there was sometimes time, and I got rather complete stories with very, very much detail.

Lage: So that must have had quite an impact on you.

Riasanovsky: Yes. Again, I can't even say that I changed any views-- because of my family background, and by that time I was a college graduate with an interest in Russian history--but it does make a great difference whether you sort of talk about something or face it as part of your life.

The Usefulness of an Interest in Baseball

Lage: I've heard you tell another interesting story from the war having to do with your interest in baseball.

Riasanovsky: Yes. Again, I have had a long-standing interest in sports; it helped, and I'm sorry to say that some of my colleagues in the department would have failed.

Lage: [laughter] They would have failed the test. But give us the context.

Riasanovsky: The context is the German breakthrough at the Ardennes. You may know that they also used American uniforms and apparently got some of our passwords, and there was also a very great fear shared by Eisenhower, apparently, but not by De Gaulle. I saw Eisenhower only occasionally in the SHAPE [Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers, Europe] headquarters before the invasion--I liked him, in most ways very much. I always voted against him, for president at least [laughter]. You

don't vote in the army, of course. But the point is there that the issue involved how much there was behind that breakthrough, because we were defeated, and if they could have utilized the breakthrough the front might have collapsed. I was relatively moderate on that and in fact optimistic, because much of the information I had indicated they couldn't have had very much in reserve, but, of course, I couldn't swear for it.

Apparently, it's interesting why our intelligence failed. There was much movement, which we observed; one of the great advantages of the war was the enormous air control we had. I saw enemy aviation only once, and it was immediately chased away. What happened was that they moved, let's say, eight divisions--I'm not sure of my figures--and we reported it as four divisions arriving and four divisions departing. We missed by eight. So it was a very disorganized situation. One thing, by the way, that I hope to do when I suppose I fully retire is to read a lot on the war, because there are many things that interest me and many things I don't know. But apparently it also happened that Eisenhower decided it would be safer to retreat, and De Gaulle refused to give up Strasbourg--I repeat, this all needs checking, but in some sense I suspect it's correct, and I also saw some interesting documents then. In a military situation this was impossible. You're shot if you disobey orders. But of course this was De Gaulle and Eisenhower, and Eisenhower apparently said, "Well, all right, you don't retreat," which was his wisest statement ever made. De Gaulle was right; the Germans did not have more forces, and Strasbourg remained French.

Lage: Was this something you were aware of at the time, this division between the two of them?

Riasanovsky: No. I knew that we had certain orders which were countermanded. That's all I knew. But anyhow, at that time our division was in Germany; we were quickly moved into the Ardennes, so I was in the Ardennes battle, only in the last stage of it. But I repeat, the situation was disorganized. I remember moving and being stopped by a young fellow, and I remember that some Germans did use American uniforms and did know our passwords. What he asked me was, "Who plays third base for the Cards?" And I said, "Whitey Kurowski." And I passed [laughter]. Whitey Kurowski was a very good third baseman.

Lage: Who knows what might have happened if you had not been interested in baseball.

Riasanovsky: It's actually not a bad way to ask. Germans wouldn't know.

Lage: No, but would all young American men?

Riasanovsky: Yes, well, the division was from St. Louis, from Missouri, so he couldn't, I suppose, believe that people wouldn't know. Of course, he might not have simply shot me but told me to stand and wait and so on. But he also might have shot me, I suppose; people were shot for less [laughter].

I also had frostbite, but I didn't have to be evacuated. It was very cold in the Ardennes at that time.

Lage: Did you have serious frostbite?

Riasanovsky: For a while it sort of looked blue, but then over a period of time it disappeared.

Recalling Cheery Major Alexander and Other Officers

Lage: Anything else from those war years?

Riasanovsky: Well, you see that it's sort of, in some sense, academic war years. There was relatively little danger; once a shell landed and would have killed me, but it didn't explode.

Lage: That seems to me a fairly high level of danger.

Riasanovsky: Anyhow, you see, I got a Bronze Star and four campaign ribbons, but I think I was just far enough from the front--not very far, but this was precisely the territory that mattered. We lost over 15,000 people killed and wounded in our division. But, as I say, my main job was to try to keep the German opposite units straight with some of our officers who couldn't do it. For instance, Germans used two calculations or two series--there were the divisions and the SS [Schutzstaffel] divisions. Panzer divisions--Panzer means tank--or we use "armored" as Americans; that's something else: we have a different terminology from the British. But in any case, there is the 2nd Armored Division and the 2nd SS Division. I still, I think, know the SS Armored Divisions by heart; they all have names, such as *Das Reich* or *Adolf Hitler*. It's obviously important whether we have one or the other or both. And by the time I would write it and send it to the colonel, the colonel would forget SS or what. Some years back--perhaps fifteen years after the war--I got a

history of our division that they sent me. And they got it wrong [laughter]. And my first feeling was horror [laughter]. But now it doesn't matter. Suppose, what would be SS Panzer Division? It would be 15,000 people, something like a thousand or 800 tanks, so it does make a difference. We didn't have tanks in our division, although there were of course armored divisions in the American army. It was important to keep track of the enemy.

Lage: But you found that the people you were reporting to often didn't keep them straight?

Riasanovsky: They varied. We had one, for instance, totally hopeless: Major Alexander. The 83rd Infantry was originally in Ohio, and the patch of the division--O H I O is the monogram--national guard division which of course was activated, trained, and added to and so on. Some people who were prominent in society were in the National Guard and became officers in the division. And a good thing about Major Alexander was that he was always in a good mood; he was healthy, a good-looking man; he would always spend half a morning taking a shower [laughter]. I remember these dreadful days of the Ardennes when we did not know, and even orders seemed to change, and then Major Alexander stepping out of the shower and saying, "We beat them before, and we'll beat them again." [laughter] So you see, it was impossible to explain which division was what to him.

Lage: On the other hand, maybe he was good at keeping morale up.

Riasanovsky: On this morale, there's a famous remark which is in part, I suspect, correct, said by the French about the British--why Britain survived and France was defeated: because the British have no imagination [laughter].

Lage: Was this something you observed?

Riasanovsky: Yes, to some extent it's partly correct. The British have the greatest difficulty of any country I know, of any people I know, of thinking in other than their own terms. About there not being Great Britain, or what. [laughter]. The French have an excellent imagination.

Lage: I would think this experience, of serving in a division which had 15,000 dead and seriously wounded, would really be quite profound.

Riasanovsky: Yes, yes. I was not the lieutenant who was in charge of burying them. You say, "How is it?" and he said, "Business is stiff." [laughter]

Lage: [laughter] Is this true? Does humor get people through these things?

Riasanovsky: Yes, for some, yes.

Lage: You have to have that level of detachment.

Riasanovsky: The man in charge of the vehicles in our division, McGregor, was all right as an officer, but you see, I am a fan of Peter Rabbit. You remember what happened to Peter Rabbit's father? He found himself in the pie at Mr. McGregor's [laughter]. I found the name very dangerous.

I think that in my case, and I have seen that with perhaps most people, somehow you live from day to day, you react naturally, and you do not realize what it all is at least until you're out, when you're taken from the front. In a very real sense, there's no way to describe it. That's why military people feel--after a war--they're not understood or cannot be understood, and that is simply, I guess, how it is. There were all kinds of songs or statements, such as "The country is behind us. All the way behind." [laughter]

Lage: Did this experience in the war affect how you thought about your future plans or your choices?

Riasanovsky: No, I already had it all set, and I simply returned. When I was being demobilized, and there was a nice WAC [Women's Army Corps] captain or whatever rank, she said, "Well, you want to join the Reserves." I said, "No, I don't." She said, "Well, are you sure?" I said, "I'm sure." And she said, "You realize if you now join the Reserves--you're a lieutenant--you will probably be a major in time for the next war." [laughter] I just ran out!

I suppose that was an intelligent decision because they did mobilize some people in the Reserves at the time of the Korean War.

Lage: And you might have been one of them.

Riasanovsky: Yes. Probably again in intelligence although I don't know Korean. As I say, it was a wise decision; it took Nazism and the war to bring me in [laughter] so I wasn't going to come in easily.

Lage: You don't think that--other than the Nazi horrors--you would have been so enthused about participating?

Riasanovsky: No, Nazi horrors give me really a very positive argument for us. I can give you an example: the CIA [Central Intelligence Agency] was interested in my services after the war. Of course, I knew Russian; I had a perfect military record. In fact, I should add one thing: I think it was my translation into Russian of the German surrender to the Allies that the Russians accepted. There were no corrections.

Lage: You translated from German to Russian.

Riasanovsky: From English into Russian. And they accepted it without any objections. But in any case, I had absolutely no interest in being in the CIA. I don't know why they were so persistent. But finally I got a letter which said: "State your conditions and we'll meet them." I never got such an offer again; I was invited to Yale and so on, but no one said such a thing. I wrote back: "Another world war." [laughter]

Lage: Did you hear from them again?

Riasanovsky: No [laughter].

Lage: When would this have been?

Riasanovsky: Several years after the war.

Lage: After the Cold War heated up.

Riasanovsky: Then I told my girlfriend, "Why not go to Paris and demand servants?" [laughter] But of course, I was joking, and as I say, the answer was sufficient.

Postwar Paris

Lage: You spent some time in Paris after the war or during the war?

Riasanovsky: Right after. And that was really overwhelming because, first of all, it was just the end of the war. Paris is my favorite city; I was in Paris when the war ended.

Lage: Had you been in Paris before?

Riasanovsky: No.

Lage: Okay. But it was still your favorite city? Or is it now?

Riasanovsky: In the great Russian novel of Gogol's, *Dead Souls*, there is one of these sentimental, sort of cultured, characters, the landlord, who names his children after ancient Greek heroes and wants to show to the visitor their knowledge, and he says, "Aristides, what is the most beautiful city in the world?" He says, "Paris." [laughter] So it was then and now [the most beautiful city], most effectively. It's again like reading about war and being in war; it's the difference between reading about Paris and being in Paris. But it was a simply overwhelming experience in many ways.

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Riasanovsky: I loved Paris. The one thing that was functioning at the time was the metro. There were relatively few cars; there were of course some military cars. I still know Paris very well after seven months by the metro--

Lage: Seven months there?

Riasanovsky: We also were running a school in suburbs of Paris, trying to get people who knew Russian because suddenly we had a large frontier with Russia, and so on.

Lage: So this is what they had you doing the last seven months?

Riasanovsky: I was in charge of the school, yes.

Lage: Trying to teach American soldiers and officers Russian?

Riasanovsky: No, but first of all to examine people, and then to give quick courses on such things as Red Army officers, subdivisions, etc.

Lage: Was this done with the expectation there were going to be problems along that frontier?

Riasanovsky: I suppose there always can be problems, but the main idea was really very simple, a connection; after all, there was so much to decide. It was an interesting experience. A very large group of Slavs who came were from Carpathian Russia--the Carpathian area was part of Kievan Russia in the thirteenth century and then became part of the Soviet Union in 1945. In between, it's not part of Russian history. Speaking all kinds of dialects and local languages, many nice people would say, as we would talk, "I see there are two Russians. You speak one, I speak another."

There is one experience there which I still blame myself for. There was a Captain Sekerak, and we especially needed the officers because people couldn't automatically become officers, and there were many officers on the Russian side. He spoke a Slavic language which no one could place. What apparently happened is that a whole valley in the Carpathian mountains migrated to Pennsylvania, and the language was now spoken only in Pennsylvania. There was a Priest Basil who published a paper in that language--it used Cyrillic--and this man spoke fluently in that particular language. It had obvious German words. For instance, "to eat breakfast"--in Russian you say *zavtrakat'*; that language had *frühstückovati*. The word for "to telephone" was *brenketi*; in Russian, *brenchat'* may refer, for instance, to a "noisemaking toy."
[laughter]

The point is that I had an invitation from him, from Father Basil also, and I never even went to visit him; I was too busy studying and writing my dissertation.

There were others who were more easy to identify, but difficult to talk to, such as Galician, Western Ukrainian--I had one of them, and again he was valuable, because he was a captain. He was a gambler in private life; he became captain of the military police once he joined the army. He caused some problems. For instance, there was a lesson in geography--sort of basic geography dealing again with the Russians--taught by an older man, although he was in the army, Lieutenant Zaber, who was an instructor at Columbia. Suddenly this captain said, "Lieutenant Zaber, why in the world do we have to learn geography?" Zaber panicked, ran to me and said, "What am I to say?" So I marched in and said, "We have to learn geography because the army said so."
[laughter]

He complained to a friend of mine, "Lieutenant Riasanovsky does not like me because he says I'm not cultured." [laughter] But once we were returning in a train to our suburb of Paris, and there he was, and he said, "I know I'm not the best student here, but today you would be proud of me." I said, "Well, what did you do today?" He spent a whole day with a family and spoke only Russian. And he said, "Imagine. They came from the same village as my father." [laughter]

Also in Paris was the wonderful opera, movies, etc. Gordon Wright was in Paris at least for part of that same time, as political officer.

Lage: Were there many actual Russians there?

Riasanovsky: At that school we got some. In Paris, there were many. On the whole, we got enough people, and I think even with this character from Galicia, what happened was they would get one from Galicia too [laughter]. So it's sort of a good function.

Lage: But was Paris functioning well?

Riasanovsky: Yes and no. The metro was functioning. The people were hungry. The black market was absolutely rampant. There were other moments I remember in the St. Germain park--some Tunisian or Algerians soldier in the French army. I said something in French, so we talked French, and they said, "Could we please join the American army?" [laughter]

Lage: They thought they would get better food?

Riasanovsky: Better everything. Or, again, walking along the Seine, a person came and said in broken English that if only I would give him my coat--it was an army coat; army coats were stolen right and left. He said something again in broken English, and then I turned to him in French, and he dissolved. American lieutenants are not supposed to know French.

Lage: Especially as naturally as you knew it.

Riasanovsky: I remember I thought the man would really collapse physically. And then there was no more talk about selling the coat. But that's an unpleasant aspect of it, although I learned there very much. And also when I was in Italy for the first time, in 1947--you see, still shortly after the war. In some ways, Italy was much more disorganized than France. But one can have different impressions, and they do not necessarily clash. The situation can be horrible and the country can be beautiful. That was certainly true of Paris and even more so of Italy.

Lage: More horrible?

Riasanovsky: Yes, and more beautiful. Well, more beautiful I wouldn't say, but very beautiful.

III GRADUATE STUDIES AT HARVARD AND OXFORD

Russian History at Harvard

Lage: Shall we move you back to school?

Riasanovsky: Yes. Willingly.

Lage: Why Harvard? Was that always in your plans?

Riasanovsky: Yes and no. Everyone knows Harvard, but essentially two schools I felt were best for Russian history: Harvard and Yale. Very different in some ways. The professor at Yale was [George] Vernadsky; he published much more and was a much more notable person, but also a very odd person in some ways--I mean intellectually, with views which--well, to tell you the truth, to the extent that much later in connection with his promotion, Yale asked me whether he was a fraud, and I said no. But I mean, it's that odd at times.

But the decisive point was that Harvard had a more flexible program than Yale, allowing for instance for study in Europe and so on. Yale had rather rigid requirement--three years' residence, or whatever. So that's why I chose Harvard over Yale. I look back now with a feeling, again, that I was in my life very lucky, because now you spend a year applying, whereas I applied to only one school.

Lage: And you applied after the war?

Riasanovsky: Yes. That's reasonably common; now, you know, you apply to at least twelve schools or whatever. But, this is why I went to Harvard. Of course, at that point I thought that I would get my doctorate from Harvard, but what happened was that I got a Rhodes scholarship and went to Oxford.

Lage: Did you get a Master's from Harvard?

Riasanovsky: Yes.

Lage: Did you have the GI Bill?

Riasanovsky: Yes. I was well-subsidized at Oxford: I had both the GI Bill and the Rhodes Scholarship, so I was doing well.

Lage: And how was your family doing? Was your father's health recovering?

Riasanovsky: Well, no, he never recovered enough to teach. Mother got enough money as a writer, and she also became a professor herself at Oregon State of Russian literature and language, which of course she knew very well.

Lage: Did your father continue to write?

Riasanovsky: Yes.

Lage: So tell me more about Harvard.

Riasanovsky: I liked Harvard very much. And I really had a whole series of very outstanding professors, although of different kinds. Again, a very good graduate school. One interesting thing is that I had my first full course of Russian history at Harvard from [Mikhail] Karpovich, because Wright had taught only the modern period. Father never taught me "official" courses; I did more work in Russian history with him than with anyone else, but in some sense, I got my basic course there. Perhaps the most interesting course I had at Harvard--I only audited it--was [Joseph] Schumpeter's course on history of economic theory. Recently I read in an article that this would be known as the Age of Schumpeter; well, it may or may not be, but it was very interesting indeed. Crane Brinton was one of my teachers--again, a very famous teacher, actually not a good teacher, but nevertheless interesting to work with. On the whole it was a good thing.

Lage: Did you do a lot of designing your own course of study or did you--

Riasanovsky: You know, that's again a difference between us and European students. We all design our own courses; study choice is great. I had some reading and conference courses again with Karpovich, and so on. I had the highest record at Oregon in my graduating class, and I think I had the highest record at

Harvard perhaps ever, and for this reason: Harvard does not give A-pluses, and I got two A-pluses. One was from a professor from Yale who simply left before he learned the system. The other is more interesting: it was [Robert P.] Blake in Byzantine history. He was a completely confused person; he probably thought that I wrote one of my father's books, in which case he had to give me an A-plus [laughter].

Lage: [laughter] That's very modest of you, to give that explanation.

Riasanovsky: Well-meaning--but not knowing--people say, "Wouldn't your father crush you? How could you follow in his footsteps?" [laughter] But it's interesting: Blake's course in Byzantine history was remarkable in many ways. It was a graduate course, and in a sense it was a lesson perhaps for me at least in humility, because he would come in and fill the blackboard with names, and we wouldn't know a single one. He began the course by saying that here's a long book list, etc., but "I shall lecture to you on little-known things in Byzantine history." He was about 300 or 350 pounds, he would press himself back against the wall and blush. A memorable class, with such passages as Commander of the Left Horse, meaning a military rank, a unique Byzantine designation, and then suddenly his eyes would light up and he would say, "No, there's a comparable one in the Thai army." [laughter]

He was absolutely kind of out of this world; he knew Latin fluently--he knew more or less all languages fluently, but he could never get to write much. One of his famous articles is about a coin which travels in forty-nine countries. Once he assigned to us a reading in Turkish; well, it turned out that we couldn't do the reading, and he said, "Why doesn't anyone learn Turkish?!" [laughter]

Professor Gaetano Salvemini

Riasanovsky: Another remarkable international figure was Professor [Gaetano] Salvemini from whom I took Italian Renaissance. Professor Salvemini was a very dominant figure--

Lage: At Harvard?

Riasanovsky: First in Florence, in the historical world. He challenged Mussolini to a duel and had to leave Italy. He received the

special chair created for him at Harvard. After the war he returned to Florence and resumed the lectures from the place he had left and invited his students, me included, to be there. I did not come. But he was, among other things, a great secularist, a great enemy of the church; such people exist mainly in France and Italy--you see, in England and elsewhere, where people are not very religious, they behave properly--not Salvemini. We had a discussion group for the class, and he had complete quotes on cannibalism in the Middle Ages. He would say, "And they say that it was a holy time! Organic society!"

He never learned the English way of designating centuries, because, you know, in Italian it's different. The seventeenth century is the sixteenth because it's the six that you see. So we always had our centuries wrong. That, of course, didn't stop him. As he would lecture, just out of nowhere he would say, "Gentlemen, if you remember one thing in history, remember: history is never yes or no. History is always more or less." And he was moving his fingers like that [gestures], and we would begin to see wires from his fingers to the back of the room [laughter].

One evening we were tired, and we went to the movies, and there was a British movie, and then there was a short on great Italians in the United States. And the next moment Salvemini was there [on the screen], saying, "Gentlemen, I want you to remember one thing about history: history is never yes or no. History is always more or less." [laughter] And then we knew there was no escape.

One of my friends from Oregon--it was Wallace MacCaffrey; he became a very distinguished historian of Britain, chairman of the Harvard department, now retired in England. But he couldn't decide between English history and Italian history. Again, like I passed my German examinations, he passed all his Italian examinations, and was therefore in charge of Italian prisoners in our camp here, and every one spoke Italian: Italians and Italian-Americans, or something. But he said that he knew he was far gone when he turned to one of the prisoners--it was right in New Jersey, and there were people running down the street, and he said in Italian, "Look what those Americans are doing now." [laughter]

Well, he made an appointment with Salvemini, addressed him in his excellent Italian, and Salvemini was delighted. He said, "I know exactly what you are going to do. You're going to write a dissertation on landholding in Sicily, and

you will prove three points." [laughter] And he went out and went into English history.

So you see I had a really remarkable variety of teachers.

Harvard Professor Karpovich and a Remarkable Group of Russian Scholars

Lage: What was Karpovich like, and his--

Riasanovsky: Karpovich was a very nice person, very well educated, a very cultured Russian. He was, I think, cultural attaché or assistant cultural attaché in 1917 for the provisional government when it collapsed, and he was--

Lage: And he had come to the United States?

Riasanovsky: Well, he was representing, you see. He came from Russia, but he was cultural attaché for the Russian government, but the government collapsed and--.

He was very knowledgeable, a very good teacher. He published little, helped his students, a very kindly man. At one point, my arrangements with housing seemed to fall through, and he said, "Well, just live with my family." And I suppose it would have cost nothing. Fortunately, I made other arrangements; I didn't have to live with his family. So he was wonderful with students. Perhaps because of the name of Harvard he gathered the best group--it was a tremendously able group of people, right after the war.

Lage: Your fellow students?

Riasanovsky: Yes. You know, one sort of dramatizes, or likes especially his own group; and I mentioned to Karpovich that I always thought it was the best. He said, "Of course, it was the best." So it's not only my opinion, and the explanation is that people who would have gone to Harvard in '41, '42, '43, '44, '45, were instead in the armed forces.

Lage: So the cream of that crop was--

Riasanovsky: But he was not a great scholar, did not write enough to be a great scholar, but he was a very intelligent, sensible person. I mentioned Vernadsky--they were childhood friends.

I remember when Vernadsky met me at New Haven at the train station, his first words were, "Why doesn't Misha [Michael] write?" Well, Vernadsky was given to Eurasianism, the idea that there is a new organic Russia, etc., combining Europe and Asia, and Karpovich would lecture on this subject, Mongol domination, and would say that Professor Vernadsky emphasized there was a common market, one system of trade at the height of Mongol rule from the Vistula [River] to the Pacific. Then he thought for a minute and said, "Of course, there wasn't much trade then." [laughter] So he always had this common-sense view which was very nice, but he was also remarkably humane.

But to finish with Salvemini. When Salvemini died, I was asked to write something about Salvemini. I recalled his magnificent style, and I wrote that if there is lecturing in the next world, it was Salvemini who will be lecturing [laughter].

Lage: No wonder people ask you to write these in-memoriam type of things. You seem very good at it.

Riasanovsky: He may have to do some explaining about his religious views: "Organic time!" [laughter]

So you see Harvard was a good experience. People asked at Harvard why I wanted to go to Oxford, and I said, "Well, I like both, but you see this gives me two." So I left.

Lage: Do you want to say anything about the group of students that you were a part of?

Riasanovsky: That group dominated Russian history until yesterday--now people are retiring--to the extent that, and I'm not very serious now, but if someone who was not from that group and got a good job we were surprised [laughter].

Lage: There probably wasn't much else going on.

Riasanovsky: Columbia had a program, and over a period of time there were quite a few but this was of course a very good time, and somehow we came to occupy the best positions. Again, Karpovich was not like Salvemini; people were left alone and on their own, so you had a great many different opinions. I remember once we met, and we were guessing, completely unhistorically, we admitted: Suppose people in the Soviet Union could vote for or against the Soviet system. This is unhistorical because what's the alternative? What else? How many would vote for? The opinions ranged from 15% to

85%. The 15% were [Richard] Pipes and I. But what I'm trying to say is that sometimes at some universities that it's all one point of view--there were just any number of points of view right there.

Lage: And was Martin Malia part of that group?

Riasanovsky: Yes.

Lage: Maybe we should wind up because I didn't realize it was so close to noon.

Riasanovsky: Yes, I should have released you, but I like to remember.

Lage: Next time you might think of some other things about Harvard. If you do, we'll continue and then we'll go to Oxford.

Riasanovsky: I'm probably more or less done with it; we can move to Oxford, a different world.

An Aside on Wartime Reading

[Interview 3: February 21, 1996]##

Lage: Today is February twenty-first, 1996, and this is our third session with Professor Riasanovsky; again we are meeting in your office in Dwinelle Hall.

I want to pick up on something that you mentioned in your article of reminiscence ["On History, Historians, and an Historian," *Russian History*, 15, Nos. 2-4 (1988)] but which we didn't talk about last time: the books that you carried with you during the war.

Riasanovsky: During the war I had two books: the Bible and Langer's *Encyclopedia of World History*. I had time to read them thoroughly, and the Bible actually proved to be a disappointment because I had picked it up in London at the Orthodox church, and it happened to be in Russian rather than Church Slavonic. In some sense, it all sounded odd--to give you an example, the Lord's Prayer in Church Slavonic is *Otche nash izhe esi na nebesech*; the Russian is *Nash otets kotoryi na nebe*.

Lage: Is Church Slavonic not very closely related to Russian?

Riasanovsky: Well, it's very closely related, but enough changed--suppose it were in Old English. Of course, it's related to Modern English, but--

Lage: And the *Encyclopedia of World History*, was that picked up in London also?

Riasanovsky: No, that was obtained earlier.

Lage: Was it something you thought about, which books to take along?

Riasanovsky: Yes, Langer's, and I still have it. I read it and cross-referenced it, let's say, French-English relations--there would be something about that in the section for France, and the section on England, so that that sort of became a basic book. That is not the best book story from the war. The English Professor Philip Taylor was a specialist in American history and migration to the United States and taught at the State University of Iowa, and we even shared an apartment for a year. He had Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, and he read it four times while his division never went into action--British, of course--but was sent to Burma, to South Africa, to North Africa--so he kept traveling and reading Tolstoy [chuckle] in this confusion of the war. I think that's the most remarkable reading I know during the war.

Lage: It's sort of like the old question, What books would you take to a desert island?

Riasanovsky: Yes, yes. But I'm very well satisfied with my book. I have a good memory so for instance, very briefly before I joined the army I worked in a fruityard near Eugene. So I would read the paper in the morning and then work. And in the evening I could recite it--not retell, but recite it. So, you see, I had a good knowledge of world history and different courses; I had already been reading and studying for years and years before that.

Selection as a Rhodes Scholar

Lage: Last time, we talked about Harvard, and finished just as you left for Oxford. Tell me about the process of being chosen as a Rhodes scholar.

Riasanovsky: This is interesting. Rhodes scholars were always elected by Rhodes scholars, except that the chairman of any particular committee is not a Rhodes scholar; he might be the president of a university or whatever. Later, I was interested in the Rhodes scholar process of election, first in Iowa where I taught, and then in California. By the way, this is still not quite understandable: we, University of California at Berkeley, do very badly on Rhodes scholarships. There are some helpful indications why, but if you want to go into them later, we can.

But the point is that my brilliant achievement cannot be matched, and I'll explain to you why [chuckle]. Rhodes scholars are elected on two levels; first, you must be-- well, there can be lower levels, but a state can nominate two Rhodes scholars. Then the next stage, and the last stage, the country is divided into eight groups of six states each. Because of the later arrival of Hawaii and Alaska, it became seven in two cases, but six states each before that. And each state can nominate two people, so that gives you twelve nominations for each particular group, and you can elect any two.

That's the last, you see: there is no national stage, so you are first elected from your region, and that's it.

Lage: And who chooses from the state? The Rhodes scholar group?

Riasanovsky: Yes. There are two ways also to apply. You can either apply from your home state--in my case, Oregon--or you can apply from the university you're at--in my case, Harvard. Well, I applied for Oregon for one overwhelming reason: they pay your transportation, and I could be home for Christmas.

Lage: Oh, so there are those differences, too.

Riasanovsky: I was nominated--both Don Treadgold and I--sort of, not exactly sight unseen, but by the state of Oregon without any further discussion.

Lage: Without an interview?

Riasanovsky: Yes, I had the highest graduating average in my class, Don in his. That was relatively easy. So everything depended on the regional appointment. Usually, those meetings are dreadful because here are twelve people; it usually begins with dinner. Dinner maybe in the evening, interviews the following day, or--everything was being dropped and so on.

Lage: You mean the silverware and all?

Riasanovsky: Yes. I thought that I had a pretty good chance. One of the regional people was one of my professors at Oregon, and another happened to be an admirer of my mother's novels. But then I was seated next to a man, and I don't remember the name, who had just become head of the medical school at the University of Washington in Seattle. He came from Harvard.

Lage: Was this the admirer of your mother's novels?

Riasanovsky: No. You see, I was picking up votes. [laughter]

Lage: Your political side is coming out. [laughter]

Riasanovsky: In any case, it was of course extremely important to impress him. The medical school had just been founded in Seattle and he had just moved from Harvard. So I sat next to him, and I tried to be very intelligent, and of course we had Harvard to talk about, and I did cautiously and very intelligently [laughter]. And then he said, "You know, another reason you're lucky being near all these remarkable historical sites, some of the most important in our nation." And I thought, "I always wanted to visit Lexington and Concord, and never have." [laughter] I have since, but not then.

I thought, What to do? Well, during the war I was stationed in Maryland for a while, I had a leave, and I went to Gettysburg. I spent a day, there was an excellent museum in Gettysburg, and I really walked the battlefield and Pickett's charge up Cemetery Heights, and I started describing it to him slowly so we would finish dinner with this topic.

And the man was changed. His face was really changed. He said, "Yes, Gettysburg. That's where I was courting the young lady who became my wife." [laughter]

Lage: You picked the right site!

Riasanovsky: And so I became a Rhodes scholar. So you see why I cannot tell our people how to win scholarships.

Lage: I had understood that one of their criteria was being well-rounded and often having a sports interest. Did they inquire about that?

Riasanovsky: Since I've often been on Rhodes committees since then, this is one thing that is somewhat misunderstood. I think two things are necessary: some interest in sports, outdoor life, and so on; and especially, perhaps--again, different committees act differently--after our high authorities in England, Lord Eldon was first, when Mathewson committed suicide, the famous Harvard professor, and of course Rhodes Scholar and author of the new England Renaissance, et cetera--in England you shouldn't commit suicide; in France, you're allowed to. But this was England, so he was very upset, and he sent a note to the committee saying that we should not appoint these literary people to the Rhodes scholarship unless they're as good as Robert Penn Warren [laughter] who was also a Rhodes Scholar. So there are different opinions. But still, one way to go against this rule is to show disdain for sports and outdoor life and so on. But otherwise, for instance, if you collect butterflies and run around, that should qualify you.

Of course, there have been a few great athletes--Whizzer [Byron R.] White, the Supreme Court judge; [Bill] Bradley, who recently is retiring as senator [from New Jersey], was a basketball player. And that's fine, but that's not the requirement.

I can tell you a story--told by another Rhodes scholar, a Christian Science Monitor editor--how they had a very good person; they liked him, but he seemed to be too narrow. His field was chemistry, and he is spending his time in the laboratory at MIT [Massachusetts Institute of Technology] or some such place. And they said, "Suppose tomorrow you inherit a million dollars. What are you going to do?" It would have no effect: he would go back to the laboratory. He said, "Well, it's a vacation, where would you go?" He'd go back to the laboratory. And in despair, he said, "Well, look, your professor's gone. The laboratory's locked." And the man said, "Ah, but I have the key." [laughter]

Lage: Did he get the scholarship?

Riasanovsky: That is to be avoided. Actually, he didn't get the scholarship. [Jimmy] Carter didn't either, incidentally.

And I said I played badminton. I had a fine war record; I suppose that was quite enough for activity.

But people have this impression that Rhodes scholars must be outstanding athletes, and it isn't so. So you just shouldn't be only laboratory.

Lage: You had a formal interview as well as an informal dinner.

Riasanovsky: Oh, yes, of course. But, I repeat, the sorry part of my performance is that it cannot be passed on [laughter].

Education at Oxford

Lage: Well, let's go on to Oxford, then.

Riasanovsky: Yes. Well, Oxford I liked very much. I guess, now that I think of it, one very fortunate aspect of my educational life was that almost always I could do what I want. We have of course an elective system in our universities. I was studying at home all the time, learning. My final school before college was, as I said, a completely individual and progressive school in that sense. And again, at Oxford, once you are admitted to the doctorate, I could do anything; of course, I had to write a dissertation, defend it, and get a doctorate. In a sense it is a loss--Oxford is most famous for individual tutorials, and I had no individual tutorials. I had many meetings with [Isaiah] Berlin, and [B.H.] Sumner, who guided my work and so on--but that could be, however, like in an American school.

Lage: But why didn't you have the tutorials?

Riasanovsky: Because I wasn't an undergraduate.

Lage: Oh, I see. That's for undergraduates.

Riasanovsky: Yes. As to American education and Oxford, a doctorate depends very much on what you do. For instance, I still had college mates at St. John's who spoke Latin and Greek, because, of course, of going to public, which is private, schools. Also we had Gilbert Murray, who must have been ninety then; he was a fellow of the college. Gilbert Murray was reportedly the last person who thought in ancient Greek. But I couldn't check on that.

But in any case, if you come in classics [from the United States], you are way behind. It's the same situation: I remember Professor [Klaus] Baer, who was here; he was of German origin and an Egyptologist. Someone asked him, "When did you start to study Egyptian?" He said, "At the age of five."

On the other hand, for example, I suppose--I'm comparing Oxford with the best American universities, but still--in sociology, psychology, political science--political science is more complicated, depending on whether you want philosophy or more practical politics--but in many fields, Oxford was not ahead of American universities, so I generally advise candidates for Rhodes scholarship to try higher rather than lower; not to assume that you must again do undergraduate work and so forth.

Lage: How did it compare in history to what you had experienced at Harvard and Oregon?

Riasanovsky: History is one of the great fields. Of course, again, I had great previous training in it. In fact, later one member of the Rhodes Scholar Committee wrote, I learned, that basically they gave me the scholarship, but said, "One argument against is that he is already a professor."
[laughter]

Lage: Well, you must have made an impression.

Riasanovsky: But the point is also Russian history of course was not the central point.

Lage: In your studies?

Riasanovsky: No, no, at Oxford. If I were in Paris, in French history--you see what I mean. Until I got to the library in Helsinki, Finland, the Russian field was always, if not marginal, at least out in Siberia rather than central. To give you another example, [Benedict H.] Sumner was an excellent scholar--

Lage: And what was his field?

Riasanovsky: Well, I mean, these are people who read my dissertation; Sumner was in Russian diplomatic history, and again, my advantages always come back. The first thing he asked, "Are you related to the scholar?" I said, "He's my father." Then, that time, he started speaking Russian, and in about ten minutes, I talked him down in Russian, and he never spoke Russian with me again.

Lage: Did this endear you to him?

Riasanovsky: Yes. I don't think he would approve of my publishing so much, because he said that publication should be like the iceberg: no more than one-tenth above water. This is not the American system, but generally it feels fine.

Working with Isaiah Berlin

Riasanovsky: Berlin, of course a world-famous figure, was from a Russian-Jewish family and spoke Russian natively. He was also completely confused and lost most of the time.

Lage: Did you speak Russian with him then?

Riasanovsky: Yes, sometimes Russian, sometimes English, sometimes both at the same time.

Lage: Now tell me more about his being confused and lost most of the time.

Riasanovsky: Well, I remember when I returned from vacation, and I got a telegram saying, "I see I have an appointment with you, but who are you and why?" [laughter]

Lage: Who are you and why?!

Riasanovsky: Yes, and why the appointment?

Lage: This was after you had been working with him [laughter]?

Riasanovsky: Yes, some time with him, yes.

Lage: That must have been a little disheartening.

Riasanovsky: Yes. Well, at the same time, he kept inviting me to dinner at the high table in New College; I would usually sit between him and his friend Lord David Cecil, who, when invited to the University of Chicago--and the joke's on Cecil, not on Chicago--said, "University of Chicago? What in the world is that?" [laughter] It is quite one of the world's greatest universities.

Lage: Well, what did they think of you, this American with a Russian accent?

Riasanovsky: They knew my background. The first question, Are you related to the scholar?

But Berlin was also disorganized. I remember we met in a bookstore in Paris, and he was going to the Italian Riviera and I was returning to Oxford, and I said, "I'm going back to Oxford; should I take your books?" And the proprietor rushed up to me and said, "Please take them; he lost the last two consignments." [laughter] So I don't know how many more examples you want, but--

Lage: Well, tell me more about his intellectual qualities.

Riasanovsky: I guess I can give you a big bibliography.

Lage: Or what he contributed to your thinking.

Riasanovsky: Just one more story. The president of our college was A. L. Poole, a famous medievalist--history still was first of all medieval, but then there were many historians. There were twenty-two, twenty-five colleges; all of them had several historians. Look at what kind of faculty this gives you in general, even if twenty or more were in English medieval history. So in that sense, the faculty was enormously impressive.

So, A. L. Poole was the president. We had to appear at the end of the term, known as the viver, sort of a live appearance, and receive comments on our work and be asked about it.

Lage: Individually appear in front of him?

Riasanovsky: Yes, him and other fellows of the college, and he could say little; I wasn't working at St. John's, I was working as a graduate. He said, "Good," and then he said, "Mr. Riasanovsky, may I ask you a more personal question?" I said, "Yes, sir?" "When you are with Mr. Berlin, do you ever get to say a word?" [laughter] Obviously, he didn't.

Lage: How did you answer?

Riasanovsky: I said, "I'm also very talkative."

How he influenced me is difficult to say. And that's a very interesting situation because teaching is such a complicated matter, and there is no one way. And while we have many fine teachers at Berkeley--I could of course name them, and generally I think highly of them. I think

Berkeley is difficult for undergraduates, who are shy, who come from poor backgrounds, more secluded communities. If you are very good, and if you are assertive enough, you can also work with some of the world's greatest scholars.

But our general approach to education leaves much to be desired. For example, we have all kinds of programs: you can get up to seventy-five dollars--I never applied for seventy-five dollars--or more for something innovative in classes and so on. And we don't give enough time for people to read examinations. You're supposed to turn them in in twenty-four hours, forty-eight hours, or what, but it helps that Saturdays and Sundays don't count. So if you get a Saturday and Sunday, you have four days. But this is ridiculous; you have often useless and trick devices and do not do enough with the basic educational process.

We had here in the History Department a visitor, a British professor, a specialist in the history of India. At the end of it, he got this directive saying "Please return the exams in forty-eight hours." He called the registrar and said, "Sir, this is immoral." [laughter] He of course is right. Also, the usual rules of basic psychology might have some meaning, but for example, first you should in lectures summarize what you are going to do. At the end, you should summarize what you did. You have fifty minutes, you lose ten minutes, which is one-fifth of the course. A wonderful thing: there should be no more than one idea in a paragraph. Well, with Berlin, there are fifteen ideas [laughter].

But why I said all this in part is because with Berlin the worst thing was that usually you couldn't hear him; he was the fastest speaker imaginable.

Lage: Now was this in lecture or in your individual--

Riasanovsky: Always, always.

##

Riasanovsky: He was known as the only person whose second sentence you would hear before you hear his first.

Lage: [laughter] This must have been very difficult.

Riasanovsky: It was.

Lage: And they probably didn't have Fybate notes on his lectures.

Riasanovsky: No. People were lying around the podium simply to be as near as possible. Sometimes he would confuse what he was lecturing on, which course it was, or he would be reading proofs of something he was publishing.

Lage: Well, I see why you say that book of conversations didn't reflect him [*Conversations with Isaiah Berlin*, Ramin Jahanbegloo, ed. (New York: Scribners, 1992)].

Riasanovsky: No, not at all--

Lage: Because it was very simple.

Riasanovsky: Yes, I mean, there was no Berlin there. You would say by most standards certainly--our education department and so on--he was a failure as a teacher and should not be allowed to teach. Or at least invited to teach. At the same time, he was one of the most popular lecturers--[Arnold] Toynbee was another--and an enormously brilliant person. I'm not an absolute admirer of Berlin; I don't think he's one of the great minds; it is very difficult to define great minds, but I would say, for instance, Schumpeter at Harvard was. Much would seem sort of to rush and evaporate. But the particular brilliance and the ability to say interesting things and to say it to the point was fantastic. And what is very interesting--the longer I live the more I think of myself as Berlin's student.

Lage: Oh, really?

Riasanovsky: And I should say that in addition I attended his lectures. At Oxford lectures are not connected with courses. What the undergraduates do is have individual tutorials and readings, and lectures are given on a separate track--you can attend as many hours as you want to.

Lage: And is each one a unit to itself or are they a series?

Riasanovsky: There are all kinds of lectures. There was, for instance, a lecture on the great crises in European history, and we had, more or less, great specialists on each crisis. I think one was covered by sort of a young Ph.D., but otherwise people were right there. So I attended Berlin's lectures, but also I had endless conversations with him--sometimes until two in the morning, in his rooms. He would say, "What are you doing? What are you trying to do?" I said, "Well, I am trying to write a doctoral dissertation." [laughter]

Lage: Did he help you clarify your thinking?

Riasanovsky: I don't know. He made it much more interesting, but what I say, he seems to help to clarify my thinking now. That's the amazing thing. It's not because we think the same thing. For example, one aspect of the Berlin intellect and approach is that he is not at all a religious person. He is a determined Jew, but I think you can be Zionist or Zionist-like without being religious. So he always said about religion--well, simply, "I don't have it; there's nothing to consider." That's not at all my approach.

In other ways too, we have quite fundamental differences. Obviously completely accepted--that goes without saying.

Lage: In that book of conversations, I noticed that he thought you couldn't be part of the intelligentsia and be a member of the Russian Orthodox church.

Riasanovsky: Yes, but that is a definition of intelligentsia with which I also disagree--it's a good definition, but I prefer another. By that definition, Dostoevsky is not a member of the intelligentsia.

I prefer a broader definition. So what he says makes sense, but I disagree with it.

You see, it isn't that I'm Berlin's student; I guess I'm not in any tangible sense, and yet as I wrote, for instance, my last book on the emergence of Romanticism, it reminded me time and again of my nighttime conversations with Berlin.

Lage: How interesting.

Riasanovsky: And in an odd way--not that he said it. But that is the association that goes on.

Lage: So something in the quality of the thinking, or--

Riasanovsky: Yes, and the insight and the intellect.

Lage: So whatever influence was not specific--

Riasanovsky: No, and long range. I dedicated the book to him and another Oxford teacher for that reason. The other Oxford teacher--a very different one--Schenk did write directly on Romanticism, and in fact on religion; he was a very strong converted Catholic. He wrote a very interesting and

important--to my mind--book on Romanticism. So there it's very correct. But I could do much more easily without Schenk than without Berlin.

Lage: Would you argue with Berlin about the question of religion?

Riasanovsky: Yes. Well, religion, no. We would argue occasionally about some religious thinker and what he said or not. Berlin is also primarily, as I mentioned in my review of the book we discussed, a philosopher.

Lage: Rather than a historian.

Riasanovsky: Yes. And at first, even when he was my teacher, he was still apologizing for directing my work, saying, "I'm not really a historian; I shouldn't be doing it." Eventually, he was recognized as a leading figure in intellectual history, so he stopped apologizing. I suppose Berlin was also my most important single teacher, but at the same time I had a wildly good time going to any number of lectures. I still have many of the notes and so on. In that sense, it's a wonderful situation that in so much in my education I could do what I want.

Other Great Scholars at Oxford

Lage: Now in doing your dissertation, was that pretty much on your own? Or would you take sections back to Sumner and Berlin--

Riasanovsky: I would. Sumner was already old and tired; he died shortly after of progressive stomach ulcers. They kept operating in surgery, and finally he died. He read every word I wrote, and I remember that at a late stage he already had some sort of horrid brown sugar--glucose--that he could eat. He couldn't eat other things, and I would get a piece of that glucose [laughter].

I remember once, while Sumner and I were going over a chapter, the famous historian Sir Morris Powicke came. The butler came--Sumner was warden of All Souls' [College] and had a whole staff--and said, "Sir Morris came to see you, Sir." He said, "I have now to work on a chapter. He could return or he could wait," and sent him back. So Sir Morris said he would wait. And so Sir Morris waited for an hour and a half while we were going through my chapter. So you see there's devotion.

Now, obviously, Berlin's style is different: he didn't know what chapter he was on, or why it should be a chapter. He always had--well, one example: Jules Michelet [1798-1874] was a prominent figure in French intellectual history, Berlin and I were going over a chapter and Berlin said, "Why don't you write here about Michelet?" And I say, "Well, there's no evidence that the Slavophiles read Michelet." "Well, just write an aperçu, a comparison." So I go and write an aperçu, a comparison. Berlin is satisfied, I take it to Sumner, and he marks in the margin and says, "Was this really necessary?" [laughter] So I come back to Berlin. Berlin is crestfallen. He looks up and says, "Sumner, Sumner, a great historian, only no one can stand reading him." [laughter]

Lage: So how did it get resolved?

Riasanovsky: Well, Berlin went to teach at Harvard for a semester. It went out. There's no Michelet in the Slavophile book.

Again, it's a free system. I know, for instance, this same Taylor--I mentioned him in connection with being my apartment mate for a year in Iowa. He was from Cambridge and again had a very prominent figure, Brogan, as his director, and Brogan never even saw him. So you see, it could vary enormously.

There were many great scholars, but I can tell you a story again of a friend of mine, Edmund Dews, who was a meteorologist in the war and decided to become a lawyer. So he became a student of law at Oxford and was sent to a great German scholar--both Harvard and Oxford profited enormously from German scholars, thanks to Hitler. This man, Edmund Dews, who happened to be also in some sense more British than the British in the sense of extreme correctness, always formally dressed, always very polite, and in this case he said to his tutor at Jesus College, "Sir, I shall see--let's say Professor Baum or whatever the name; I don't remember it now--next Monday, but I want to tell you that I'm very grateful. It's not likely in my country that a beginner such as I will be sent for individual work with a great scholar." The tutor leaned forward and said, "Mr. Dews, I would like you to know that here at Oxford we're all great scholars." [laughter] He was no great scholar. So you could get a variety of things.

Social Life: Sherry and Shooting Arrows

Lage: Now aside from the intellectual life, was there much social life?

Riasanovsky: Well, a wonderful thing of course was vacations. I went to Italy for the first time; I went to Paris, not for the first time--if you remember, I spent there seven months in the war. I had relatives in England: Mother's younger sister married a Britisher. I would say that on social life Oxford would be behind. There were women's colleges, and to me Oxford women generally looked harassed and busy; it is enormously difficult to compete, especially when there are only four colleges for women.

There were exceptions. I remember Denise Cremona, for example--I think her father had been governor general of Malta, and she took French and Italian and was already completely fluent in both. So she could spend her time reading books, etc. I think she became eventually the head of the cultural department of BBC [British Broadcasting Corporation].

I would say there was less social life than in our universities. Most importantly, perhaps, although I had many friends in college and so on, I did not participate in most undergraduate undertakings. I was a member and president of the history club and so on, which they called social life. Well, it was social life. I remember the first meeting we had and the discussion was what kind of sherry to drink. [laughter] That took, you see, the first meeting. So I never had tried to join the famous shooting arrows club; we had wonderful gardens, one of the world's great gardens at St. John's College, and then the enormous lawn, and at the end of the lawn you can shoot arrows after drinking sherry.

Lage: [laughter] But you didn't get into that.

Riasanovsky: No, I never tried that. I suppose it depends on how you look at it, but I would not push social life.

Lage: Well, it sounds like there was plenty of intellectual life--

Riasanovsky: Yes, but not only that; I mean, Oxford was one of the most beautiful cities in the world, just seeing all the colleges and the churches, etc.

Lage: And you were there two years.

Riasanovsky: Yes.

Dissertation on the Slavophiles: Choosing the Topic, Finding the Approach

Lage: We didn't talk about the topic of your dissertation and how you chose it. Is it something you started at Harvard?

Riasanovsky: The topic is, of course, the Slavophiles, and here is the book.¹

Lage: Was there much change between the book and the dissertation?

Riasanovsky: Not very much. It was published in the Harvard series, and Karpovich suggested that I drop much of the general discussion on Romanticism. At the time I was sorry about it, but I followed his advice; later I realized it was quite correct, and now I have a book on the emergence of Romanticism.

Lage: Which was the general--

Riasanovsky: No, it was different; that's the point. I learned a lot. So he was correct.

I am not sure when the idea came. I must say that I was interested in many things--for instance, in the early period --so in that sense it was difficult, but once I decided not to write a dissertation on the early period--incidentally, my first independent article was published on the historiography of the origins of Russia.

Lage: On the Normans?

Riasanovsky: Yes, in the ninth century. That was just the right century and topic to establish me at Oxford. But once I decided to switch to a more modern period, the Slavophiles came interestingly up, and I don't know just how. But the

¹Russia and the West in the Teaching of the Slavophiles: A Study of Romantic Ideology (Harvard Historical Studies, 61), Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1952.

structure of the book came to me one morning when I was shaving. And I knew I had it.

Lage: The way you would organize the topic?

Riasanovsky: When I write, I always already have it completely in mind, and this just came--

Lage: Now tell me more about that.

Riasanovsky: Well, you have to read the book. Here it is, *The Slavophiles: We and They*, a division into the Slavophile ideology, the Slavophile argument, estimates and influences of Slavophilism. So you see, the crucial issue is we and they, who is where, and how it develops. And I saw that one morning when I was shaving.

Lage: So you saw the organization.

Riasanovsky: Not only that. It was actually the entire approach, you see. Both the organization and view of.

Lage: It came in more of a flash.

Riasanovsky: Yes. After considerable thinking; it's not that I thought of the Slavophiles for the first time. That has happened to me a number of times. I generally believe that we must be thinking at night. And I agree with that. I sleep very well; I've never had insomnia.

Lage: But you're assuming things are going on.

Riasanovsky: Yes.

Lage: Now what makes you believe that? Do you wake up in the morning with a new insight?

Riasanovsky: Well, I shave in the morning, and that's when it happens. Not always; I also sometimes have ideas I want and need going to sports events.

Lage: Now, where did you do your research on the Slavophiles?

Riasanovsky: Well, I needed the libraries for the Slavophiles and very much of my work in general. I worked later in archives on certain topics, but I basically worked with books because if you are in intellectual history it is the published material that counts the most. Later I was six times in the Soviet Union, largely because of materials including some archival

materials. Oxford was good because it had the Bodleian Library, and many things which it didn't have could be found in the libraries in Paris.

I didn't have the key to all of them, [laughter] but I spent a lot of time in them.

[Looking through papers] Well, this, for your kindness, I'll give you to read. You can take them. This is perhaps the best written on Berlin.¹ Better than the book of conversations.

Lage: Oh, good. Thank you.

Riasanovsky: Brodsky is a tremendously imposing figure, and I may disagree with some things, but I must say even the description of the Atheneum, the famous club in London, is correct: I was there not with Berlin, incidentally; another teacher, Professor Hugh Seton-Watson, invited me later when I came to England.

Reflecting on National, Educational, and Religious Differences: Britain, France, United States

Lage: What else do we need to say about Oxford or your--

Riasanovsky: One difficult thing is after Oxford I could either be in England, probably get a job and teach, or in the United States--I definitely decided on the United States. Somehow the society was nearer to me.

Lage: Did you spend some time making that choice?

Riasanovsky: Yes and no. I kept thinking about it, but I don't think I ever formulated in some sense that here is a basic choice, which in effect it was. I don't know--I suppose it was the society: the first toast at Oxford was always for her Majesty the Queen, and I remember in Paris on the fourteenth of July of all days, there was sort of a group of historians, and the toast was proposed. I almost said to Her Majesty the Queen, and then I realized there was no queen, and I was very pleased.

¹Joseph Brodsky, "Isaiah Berlin at Eighty," *New York Review*, August 17, 1989.

I saw the queen a couple of times, and although I had an invitation to the palace, I never made it because I was traveling in Italy, and Tagliatti was almost killed, and there was an absolute strike. So I couldn't get back on time. The strike was interesting--I got the last bus out of Rome, north to Assisi eventually, and the next bus was burned by the strikers--no one was killed, but the bus was burned--and I had to see Assisi without electricity. This was just wonderful--all the Fra Angelico and Giotto's paintings, etc. Personally, I think the British should keep their monarchs; you know the discussion now.

Lage: You think they should?

Riasanovsky: Sure. You see, I'm a historian [laughter]. But at least that day in Paris it was nicer not to have a toast for the queen. And it has its problems: I remember, as an illustration of the British approach, many years afterwards I was in the National Gallery in London, and I was looking at pictures, when all of a sudden I recognized the man next to me; we were both from St. John's at the same time, ate often together, so we went and had tea. The man in question was in the British Foreign Service, not foreign service, but sort of commonwealth service. In other words, the establishment for members of the British Commonwealth. He had just returned from several years in South Africa--well, you remember South African history--I said, "How interesting. Tell me all about troubles in South Africa." And he looked at me straight and said, "What troubles?" [laughter]

Lage: So am I gathering from this that you didn't feel quite at home in Britain, in some fundamental way?

Riasanovsky: Well, I think I would be very happy in Britain. But I felt at home in the United States, my family was in the United States--Britain has become more open to mass education since and so on, but I generally preferred our system of endless universities and hopeless students [laughter].

Lage: So despite your reservations about it--

Riasanovsky: I wouldn't say that I would be at home in every country, but certainly in England, and probably more so than in France. I like France at least equally well, but part of why one is at home at Oxford is--in some sense it is the British tradition and it's enormously strong: they have great difficulty understanding any other point of view or any other society-- But at the same time it is pre-nationalist.

For instance, Oxford was, or let's take the British Museum Library--it was always closed on Sundays, but in addition to Sundays, it was closed three days a year, as I remember: Christmas, Passion Friday, and All Saints' Day. Again, I agreed with the view.

Lage: Why do you say pre-nationalist?

Riasanovsky: Because Oxford was formed originally in the twelfth century. One thing, for example: in France you had to be a French citizen, which was very difficult to obtain, or you couldn't teach in French universities. So you had the ridiculous case of Pirenne, the great Belgian medievalist, entirely French in culture, who couldn't be a professor in Paris. If that rule applied to the United States or England, I would have lost any number of my teachers at Harvard and at Oxford. There sometimes have been bad appointments at Oxford, which is unfortunate, because in a specialized field, there would be only one person who is from Oxford of the candidates. But the division was between Oxford and the rest, not between England, the United States, and so on.

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Lage: When you left Oxford were you different intellectually from when you went?

Riasanovsky: Well, let me think about this for a moment. Fundamentally, no. I think I was probably formed intellectually very early. At the same time, I learned a great many things; it's of course a system very different from Oregon or Harvard, as I said. There's no connection between lectures and your ratings or grades.

I remember Sumner, my director, was very surprised when he was told that his general book on Russia became a textbook in the United States, and he asked me, "Do tell, what's a textbook?" [laughter] That again reflects differences because--as I mentioned earlier in connection with Berlin's opinion--it may be a narrower education but it's a much greater and deeper one than what we get. So people, for instance, in history already had basic history of every kind and don't need textbooks. So it was a different system and a very interesting system.

Lage: Does anybody flunk out of Oxford?

Riasanovsky: Yes. They have to pass examinations to get a degree, at the end of several years. Those examinations used to decide

whether you'll be governor of India or not--because, well, governorships of India disappeared. But when a person dies, you'll find in the *Times* which class degree he got; he could get first-class, second-class, third-class--

Lage: Based on how well--

Riasanovsky: Yes, on the battery of examinations at the end. If you simply pass without class and you become prime minister, that isn't mentioned. It's simply "was graduated from Oxford." There are stories that people all over the world--I suppose mainly India, Africa, and so on--even had on their visiting cards "failed Oxford." This again came up with the student movement's views that you need a more informal, more direct education, that we are sort of mass producing and too formal. It's pretty hard to measure Oxford against this system. It's certainly not an easy system. It's true that it's much more personal; you meet--if you remember, I told you, with the great scholars even if not everyone at Oxford is a great scholar--but the tensions surrounding the examinations were enormous. And yearly you would have, for instance, a series of suicides. And I remember one particular case that was in our college. So to call it an easy system would be a misnomer. At the same time it's certainly a different system. And people do work also, because remember they also must meet their tutor usually once a week or twice--generally it would be two or three people meeting with a tutor but it can also be alone, and he assigns reading, and if you don't do any work you can be sent out of Oxford.

Lage: So you can be sent away before the examinations.

Riasanovsky: Yes. Spooner was master of New College, and one of his famous statements was when he told one student, "You must leave Oxford by the next town drain,"--meaning, down train--down to London, up to Scotland. So you see you could be sent out by the next "town drain." [laughter]

What I was doing was graduate work, so some would say that I missed the best of Oxford; perhaps so, but I don't think so because I had very good directors and a great library, etcetera. I think I learned a lot, I think I attended an enormous number of lectures which were given all the time at various colleges. We had a good group of historians at St. John's too. I'm very well satisfied with it. I find it difficult to compare it to the best American schools; the systems are very different.

There are two things where they are very much ahead. One is they all can write, because they write all the time; it's a literate culture. Another is that religion is still part of education. In fact, and I'm not now proselytizing, but the point is that so much of our culture, of course, is based on the Bible, based on religion; there's no out. And there it's meaningful, and here it isn't. The spread is enormous from fundamentalists who can recite the Bible--we don't have too many of them at Berkeley, but we do have some --to people whom you can't refer to Saint Paul because they wouldn't know who he is.

In our college, at St. John's--the colleges all have their own holdings--I think St. John's owns docks in Liverpool and also much land. Some of my classmates, for instance, would like to get a First--you can even get a starred First sometimes; I'm not sure exactly when you get a star. And then they could probably get a fellowship in a college or a position in the British Museum in the archives or something and continue their work. A little less, they could be schoolmasters--and again, there are much closer connections between schools and academic learning than in our country. Many schoolmasters write and contribute to scholarship and so on. But if that doesn't work either, next you can become a minister in one of the lands of St. John's.

Lage: Oh, so they take care of their own.

Riasanovsky: Yes. One sometimes thinks: Well, my application for a fellowship was granted, fine; otherwise I could become a minister or a priest--because in the Church of England both designations of this office are possible, depending on one's religious orientation.

Lage: It makes you wonder how much religious vocation there is among those ministers.

Riasanovsky: At the same time in some sense it's a more natural attitude to religion than we often have. And, you don't have to say who Saint Paul was. Until recent times you had to attend chapel, but now you don't. Of course, Christ Church, in many ways the biggest, at least in size, not necessarily in number of students, and one of the colleges where usually the royal family goes--when the Prince of Wales went to Magdalen College, the crack at Christ Church was that he wanted to see how the other half lives--is strongly connected with the church. Its head is the dean of Christ Church and the college has a cathedral, not just a chapel.

But I repeat, without taking sides--and I'm not an Episcopalian clergyman--simply the amount of cultural knowledge that is connected with it is very large. Also until recently, of course, everyone knew Latin, many even knew Greek. It's not true anymore--in my time, right after the war, Americans were exempt from classical examinations, otherwise they wouldn't have too many Rhodes scholars who would pass.

Lage: Now did you study Latin and Greek?

Riasanovsky: I studied Latin with my father; I never took the Oxford exam, didn't have to, so I don't know if I would have passed or not, but I told you my special ability is to pass exams [laughter]. So perhaps I would have.

Greek I studied at Oxford. I studied it privately, and that was also interesting--it was, of course, classical Greek. When I went to Greece later for a visit with my family, I realized that classical Greek didn't help with modern Greek at all. In itself it is a fascinating language. It also gives you an idea of what a dead language is. My second year at Oxford I was reading Sophocles' Antigone. My first year I lived in college, the second year there I lived in an apartment some distance from it, and there I was reading Greek--Sophocles. I came across a word I didn't know. I looked it up in the dictionary: no word. I looked it up in another dictionary: no word. I bicycled to the Taylorian Library and to the greatest dictionary there. It said, "Used once by Sophocles." [laughter] So you see that's a good idea of what a dead language is as against a living language.

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Lage: Is there anything else we should say about the Oxford experience before we bring you back to the United States?

Riasanovsky: Recently there was a poll, I think, in Europe, which asked, "Which is the greatest university?" And Oxford was put as number one, and in fact the article said that everyone wants to go to Oxford, so what's Oxford going to do? At the same time, one can overestimate it too, I suppose. As I said, much depended on the field. As I said, our classicists were behind, our scientists were not necessarily behind, and so on.

Lage: Here in the United States.

Riasanovsky: Yes. Also, I must say, later I visited Oxford a number of times, gave a few lectures, etc. I didn't make any study of it, but my very positive and happy view of Oxford somewhat diminished, partly because with the conservative government policies on finance and so on, great regulations, some of my teachers became quite bitter men, and in that sense it obviously also had its limitations.

Lage: Was this later, in the eighties, that we're talking about?

Riasanovsky: Seventies, eighties. The retirement policy in Great Britain I think is very unfortunate because you have to retire at, I think, sixty-five--or even sixty--and you can retire early and many people are just in the best time of their work. You remember, perhaps, that Thatcher did not get a doctorate at Oxford. She was from Somerville College, across the way from St. John's.

Lage: Was that retirement regulation put in under Thatcher?

Riasanovsky: That entire policy, yes, much of it. So that it's not as happy a world as I remembered it. And I hope it's not going to happen to our universities--not exactly the same way; nothing is exactly the same as Oxford, but the point is that I think I can see it now with fewer appointments, and so on, how much it increases quarrels, etc.

Lage: It does change the dynamics.

Riasanovsky: Yes, but one mistake our students made, during the student movement, was that they considered the faculty as sort of moral guides. Faculty is no moral guide. If I can teach Russian history, fine, but I don't claim more. My father, who knew various groups of people, said by far the best people--balanced, judicious, extremely careful in what they do--were judges, not professors.

IV THE HISTORY DEPARTMENT AT THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF IOWA,
1949-1957

Getting Hired: "He Might Do"

Lage: How did you happen to come to the University of Iowa?

Riasanovsky: That was the best job offered at the time, and I got it.

Lage: How does one apply for work from England?

Riasanovsky: Again, I suppose I was lucky. I never had an interview, you see. But there were a few good jobs, and I think I applied--or actually I think I was asked to apply, I don't remember exactly--I don't remember the first step. I still don't know exactly why I got it because I cannot imagine Sumner writing more than "He might do."

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Riasanovsky: They had an extremely good department at the University of Iowa, then known as the State University of Iowa. Its chairman was Professor [William O.] Aydelotte, and Professor Aydelotte was the son of Frank Aydelotte, who had many high positions, but the positions included head of the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton, head of the Rhodes Scholar organization in the United States, and--I never knew such a title existed--Chief Quaker. They decide everything by silence, so I don't know what he does.

Lage: You don't think of Quakers of having a hierarchy.

Riasanovsky: No. Because he was head of the Rhodes, he didn't want his son to apply to Oxford, so his son went to Cambridge. He was my chairman.

Lage: He was chairman of your department.

Riasanovsky: Yes. He recently died; he was really a remarkable man. There was a long obituary in the New York Times. And he of course knew the English establishment. Perhaps Sumner said, "He might do," and he decided that's wonderful [laughter]. I still often cringe as I read our letters; you know, it's really difficult. I've been very fortunate in placing my students; I have no doctorates without jobs. But in the situation here, saying someone is competent is a negative judgment. That means that he is not imaginative.

Lage: In Britain that might be high praise.

Riasanovsky: Yes, very high praise, "He might become competent." [laughter] So in that sense it's also led to Aydelotte's famous answer, when one of the deans said to him that you have a notable department, but people have said you never accept anyone unless he is a Ph.D. from Harvard, Yale, or Princeton, to which Bill said, "Oh, no, no, not at all. Nick has his doctorate from Oxford, and I have mine from Cambridge." [laughter] It was a very good department.

An Excellent Department of History

Lage: When you say it was a very good department, what kinds of things did you look at?

Riasanovsky: Well, intellectual excellence. But it is documented in various ways. For example, one of my colleagues, Charles Gibson--I was excused from general examinations at Oxford because Sumner said there was no need for it, for the doctorate. Gibson, which is much more rare, was the only case I know excused from them at Yale. That's because he had already published a book on the Toltec calendar. Later he became the president of the American Historical Association; he moved from Iowa to Michigan. So he was my colleague.

Another colleague was Frank [J. F.] Gilliam. We all came exactly the same year. Frank Gilliam, in many ways a most remarkable person--I think he was engaged in codebreaking during the war--and, by the way, both of them show the strength of American education, because none of them were educated as in my case, all over the world, more or less. He became a specialist in Roman history at Yale. Both he and his wife received doctorates from Professor

Rostovtzeff, a Russian scholar who was probably the greatest historian of his generation. Frank Gilliam spent his life gathering information on the auxiliary troops of the Roman army. Everywhere: the sands of Syria, the forests of the Balkans--fascinating. Again, you know, the rules we get get easily broken. For instance, you shouldn't have too many footnotes; most of his articles have more footnotes than text--and should--because everything he used needs further documentation and explanation. He later went to Oregon, later became head of the classics department at Columbia, and still later was a professor of ancient history at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton.

So again, the excellence is documented. He also had a wonderful and absolutely devastating sense of humor.

There were several other very able people. One of them, Al Bogue [Allan G.], was a quantitative historian--Aydelotte himself became the first historian who became a member of the American Academy of Science because of his application of quantitative methods. He never quite could finish it; his life was calculating votes in the British parliament, 1841 to 1847. He had come to me--I was writing a book--and he said, "Nick, why don't you do something like this?" I said, "Bill, no parliament." [laughter]

I remember Trianon was one of the leading San Francisco restaurants, and he had invited me many times--in fact, both of us were originally bachelors; I married first, but we often ate together, and this time when he was in San Francisco I invited him to Trianon. Again, you see, his father occupied all these positions, they had servants, his father would give him a car when he would come East and so on. That's the ambience he was accustomed to. And this nice restaurant was dimly lighted, which I also don't like, because I also like to read when I eat. So he called up the manager and he said, "What nonsense is this? Get me a lamp!" And they brought an old-fashioned lamp; he turned it on and went again into his calculations on the English parliament [laughter].

Another story in the same way--he was nearsighted also--by the way, he had great difficulty deciding things. So I remember his spending ten minutes deciding between apple and cherry pie--which should he take. Also, in this case, at a meeting at one of the hotels, also in San Francisco, there was a car display in the lobby. You know, the latest cars. And he walked into a car, and then he turned and said, "What kind of place is this? A garage???" [laughter]

So you see I have very pleasant memories. And another thing he did, he had a very fine library; of course he always had money. When his eyes were failing and so on, he gave it to graduate students; anyone could come in and take ten books.

Lage: That's hard to do.

Riasanovsky: Yes. So there was much to be said for him, but as I say, I didn't know there was a Quaker chief until I met his father [laughter]. And his father wrote a book on rogues and vagabonds of Elizabethan England.

So it was a very good department; the weakness was, of course, we couldn't be kept there.

Lage: Now why is that?

Riasanovsky: Because there were bigger offers in other universities.

Lage: Oh, I see--they were willing to keep you but--

Riasanovsky: Yes, I already had tenure when I came here, so I generally never had to worry about it. But I liked Iowa very much--that's where I met my wife, and she was quite willing to go to Berkeley, and I said, "Shame on you. Aren't you an Iowan?" And she said, "That proves it." [laughter] The first year before our license plates read "California", people would honk at us everywhere [laughter].

Students and the Community

Lage: How did you find the students in Iowa?

Riasanovsky: Well, I had some disappointments, although of course I knew students at Oregon, and I knew students at Harvard. One was, I remember, at some point, I got hold of the composition of the state, then realized that most of it was German. I said, "Aha, here I have people who could be assigned books in German." Of course not. [laughter] They variously didn't know any or knew kind of a kitchen German.

Arlene's family is German by name certainly: Schlegel (and on her mother's side Lenz and Wagner). What apparently happened was that her parents were born here and so on--it's not recent, but in any case, there was a very unfortunate

attempt to eliminate German both on the part of the government and on the part of the ethnic group itself as a defense at the time of the First World War. So there were some disappointments. But at the same time, especially now, you visit Iowa and it's still largely true.

I remember I went--I like hiking, you see, walking. After all, as a Rhodes scholar I'm obliged to, I suppose [laughter]. And I took a long walk, ten or twelve miles, that first fall after I came to Iowa in '49, my first year. And how rich were the fields. There were these turkeys that were so fat, they couldn't lift themselves up. They sort of fluttered. And I understood for the first time the biblical imagery of fields bursting with produce. It really was bursting.

There were no street people. Everyone went to school. I wouldn't praise the schools too much, but the point is that--Iowa, by the way, also had a very good record of education of women. I was there several years, and I accepted invitations to speak at commencements and so on to become acquainted. I remember in the central part of the state, for example, people were proud that there wasn't a single stone in their county, only the good earth. So this was extremely attractive, and it is more attractive now, because so much has run down elsewhere.

Lage: And there's still this feeling--

Riasanovsky: There's still--I mean, I don't know, in Des Moines I suppose you could find somewhere some beggars, but you don't--in fact, the town of Maynard, from which Arlene comes--as I say, both my father and my wife were born on the Volga, only different Volgas [laughter]. I don't know why it's called Volga in Iowa; my guess is because of some German settlers from the Volga who moved to Iowa, because there is no sign of anything Russian. It looks better than ever. Her brother became mayor of it, and he took down some dilapidated buildings and so on. There's a sort of prosperity and, well, it's remarkable.

Lage: That's interesting, because I'm always hearing how the farmers are suffering.

Riasanovsky: I suppose that depends on the farmers. I also saw the Amish; they were there near Iowa City. I helped some of them because they were getting some letters in Russian from some of their kind and so on, and I could translate them easily enough. Then they wanted to pay me; of course, I didn't want

to be paid. They asked what they could do, and, well, they could take me to their farms, their turkey farms and so on. It's magnificent. Especially if you remember that I was born in China, with a sort of grinding poverty all around you and so on. And I hope we aren't going to imitate China.

Lage: How did you make contact with the Amish?

Riasanovsky: They made contact with me. They obviously asked who could read their letters in Russian.

Lage: So you really put down roots there, it seems.

Riasanovsky: I liked it very much.

Meeting Arlene, and Marriage in Finland

Lage: How did you meet Arlene?

Riasanovsky: She was head reference librarian. One decision in our life--she was offered the position of head librarian at Douglass College, the women's campus of Rutgers University. Instead, she married me, and I thought that she could be head librarian and I would be gentleman scholar [laughter]. But she also studied U.S. history, so she's a historian. First at Iowa State Teachers College, now Northern Iowa University, then at Columbia University.

Lage: Was that before she married you?

Riasanovsky: Yes.

Lage: Did she continue with her librarianship after she married?

Riasanovsky: She continued until we had children; she was offered a part-time job here as a bibliographer in Acquisitions and took it, but not after that.

Lage: And you were married in Finland.

Riasanovsky: Yes. We were engaged before that, but I got a Fulbright grant--Finland was the obvious place, because it was before you could have real exchanges with the Soviet Union, and Finland had been a part of the Russian Empire from 1809 to 1917, and Helsinki University was one of only three depositories in Russia of everything published. So it was in

Finland for the first time, when I got into a library where my materials were central.

Lage: So everything published in Russia was deposited there.

Riasanovsky: There, and in Saint Petersburg and Moscow. In fact, the first reading room was sort of lined with bookshelves, with a periodical I needed for my dissertation. They had it from the 1840s.

For years after, Arlene would be told that for a Finnish girl she speaks such excellent English [laughter]. She would have liked to have spoken Finnish, but that's more difficult.

We were married in a cathedral overlooking the Gulf of Finland on the fifteenth of February. And I remember--we both remember--it was an unbelievably cold day, and the bridal bouquet withered as in a Disney movie between the taxi and the church [laughter].

Lage: Was it a Russian cathedral?

Riasanovsky: Yes. And a part of the old Russian world, because there it remained. The area never became communist.

Lage: That must have been a wonderful place to get married.

Riasanovsky: It was, yes. We had an old Orthodox ritual, with crowns and so on.

Lage: And you had some fellow historians there?

Riasanovsky: Yes, who were researching.

Then we had a reception, and I remember--we have photographs of it--one small girl, [Theodore] Von Laue's daughter, said, "There's a cake there, but I'm afraid there might not be enough to go around." [laughter]

Lage: [laughter] This is what she said?

Riasanovsky: Yes. Not to me, but I heard her say that.

Lage: Well, that sounds wonderful. Do you think this is a good place to stop for today?

Riasanovsky: I think so, yes. We'll go to other good places, but I think it's a good place to stop.

V APPOINTMENT AT BERKELEY, 1957

[Interview 4: February 27, 1996]##

Iowa and Berkeley, Some Comparisons

Lage: Today I thought we could get any additional thoughts on the University of Iowa and then move on to Berkeley.

Riasanovsky: As I say, I liked Iowa very much. We happened to have a very good history department; there was a very considerable difference among departments.

Lage: Was there a Slavic Literature and Language department?

Riasanovsky: There was, and it wasn't bad at all, a little smaller. Some departments apparently were weaker--I don't mean to think of Iowa as the same as Harvard or Oxford, but it was a good university and a very good Department of History--much better than good; that's simply proved by the people and what they have done since, if proof is necessary. And again, as led by Aydelotte, all of us had our own graduate students, our own fields, and so on. That's one reason why when I came to California, I was in that sense fully prepared to assume whatever responsibility was required. And it's very important to intellectual life, because I suppose the main argument for going into it is because that's what you want to do.

Lage: Were there differences in the departmental governance between Iowa and Berkeley?

Riasanovsky: Again, you see, it depended on the department, and there really wasn't. I suppose it was more likely, let's say, that the higher administration would restrict something in Iowa than in Berkeley, but it didn't.

Lage: It could have but didn't?

Riasanovsky: Yes, you know ours also can, strictly speaking. So there wasn't that much difference.

One great difference, as we moved to Berkeley, was how much richer Berkeley was. And still is.

Lage: The campus?

Riasanovsky: Yes, everything. When I was chairman I had to return, I think, it was a million dollars or something back to the university. There was a reason for it, because that particular grant was for an Armenian appointment, a chair, but we couldn't find the right candidate. At the same time, my brother was a professor at the University of Pennsylvania in history, and his department was borrowing seventy-five dollars from the French department. [laughter]

Lage: It's a view of Berkeley you don't hear often now.

Riasanovsky: Well, now it's much harder. I have had so many breaks in my life--and really my career has to be considered over now more or less although I'm still teaching and still writing--but I think that I was fortunate to be in the best time of American education, from at least a professor's point of view in the universities.

There was this enormous expansion after the war. I remember when [Glenn] Seaborg was chancellor [1958-1961]. A famous story: he wrote to the philosophy department when [William] Dennes was chairman--a Rhodes scholar, by the way--that the philosophy department isn't at all bad, but there is room for improvement and expansion. And I'm not quite sure of all my figures, but the general picture I think is correct: he proposed that the department appoint one scholar at the Nobel Prize level, two professors, three assistant professors. Dennes wrote back and said, "In our field we have only one Nobel Prize winner, Bertrand Russell, and he is ninety." [laughter]

Lage: So the sights were very high.

Riasanovsky: Very high. In our department for example, more than once we had two absolutely superb candidates, and we appointed both, as was the case of [Carl] Schorske and [Hans] Rosenberg [in 1960].

Lage: You mean you had only planned to appoint one but they were both so good you got approval to appoint both.

Riasanovsky: Yes. And, in the case of Schorske and Rosenberg, at a very high level. And it last time happened again several years ago, and I'm sure it cannot happen now--it's lucky if you get one appointment. At the same time, even now Berkeley is in many ways ahead of the rest of the country, because I don't know of anyone who was dropped or could not be promoted because of financial reasons.

Lage: That does happen elsewhere?

Riasanovsky: Everywhere. Almost everywhere, perhaps not at Harvard. Harvard is very rich. I remember their saying that they support every graduate student--I have one of my degrees, you know, from Harvard, so I get all the material--and then it occurred to them that it's not perhaps good for every student to be supported [laughter].

Berkeley's Prominence in Russian Studies: the Importance of Libraries

Lage: Tell me how you happened to come to Berkeley.

Riasanovsky: I came because I was invited, and I was sorry to leave Iowa. I already had tenure there, and I got tenure at Berkeley immediately as an associate professor. But of course Berkeley has been one of the very best universities; Berkeley is in the same class as Harvard and Oxford, there's no way to compare exactly.

Lage: At that time what was the perception of Berkeley in the community of scholars?

Riasanovsky: Depends very much on the field. But for example it would be tremendous in science; it was generally very high.

In my own field of Russian studies--let's call it that for a moment; it's not just that, I have books not dealing with Russia--but in Russian studies, which is so important for me, Berkeley and Harvard managed somehow--it's not really a mystery how, I mean, you can name names and dates--to establish Russian subjects ahead of other universities. And they built up their libraries. Harvard might be slightly

ahead of Berkeley, but the two of them are ahead of anything else.

Lage: So by the time you came here--

Riasanovsky: It was well established.

Lage: Through the history department or through the Slavic Studies?

Riasanovsky: Both. Slavic Studies is more directly related, but in the history department there were also two prominent professors of Russian history. One of them retired--Robert Kerner--and another, George Lantzeff, died the year before I came. Both were in very different ways fine scholars.

One thing that Berkeley profits from still is that there is also a Russian community; for instance, there were graduate students and candidates, some of them of Russian background like [Andrew] Malozemoff. Malozemoff drank himself to death eventually, but he was a prominent scholar.

Lage: What department was he?

Riasanovsky: History. You had a very high level of work going on.

Now at that time too--and I'm almost absolutely of no help here--we also have in the Bancroft one of the world's major collections covering Russian Asia, covering Alaska, covering the western United States. We have people come from all over the world to work there. So you see, all these things were very prominent.

Lage: So there are Russian collections in the Bancroft that are important?

Riasanovsky: Oh yes, absolutely first-class, on Siberia, for example. I have no books on Siberia, so that's why I say here I do not count. People even spoke of the Berkeley School of Kerner and his students: Lantzeff, who also had a degree from Russia already, from one of the great Russian historians, Presniakov; [Raymond] Fisher, who taught at UCLA for many years--Pierce, who went to Canada; so there was a Berkeley school that was very prominent indeed.

Lage: You said facts are known about why this prominence in Russian studies happened. Do you want to just review them?

Riasanovsky: Kerner deserves high credit for it. Some people in literature deserve high credit for it, too. The main

advantages were starting earlier than the others and having funds to develop library holdings.

Lage: So the libraries are key.

Riasanovsky: In the Cold War and so on, some other universities put an enormous amount of money into Russian studies, such as Michigan or Indiana, and in some cases they may be ahead of us, but in another sense once you fall behind you stay behind.

I cannot help but tell you a story I like very much. A very fine American historian, perhaps a great American historian, Kenneth Stampp, who had the office next door to me, he and [Richard] Hofstadter were young assistant professors at the University of Maryland, I think. In any case, Bear Bryant was the president.

Lage: The football coach?

Riasanovsky: Yes. So he called them out--Hofstadter and Stampp. Money did mean more at the time, but still the story holds--and he said that he had heard they were very able people, and he is delighted to have them. He also heard that Harvard is ahead in the library holdings. "Here is ten thousand; catch up with Harvard." [laughter] It's a true story. So you see there is an advantage to being there earlier.

But [Carl] Bridenbaugh, who was absolutely devoted to Harvard--I mean, the tragedy of his life is that he was never appointed at Harvard; he had a chair here, then went to Brown [University], and at that point he called [William] Bouwsma and me in, he liked us, and said that we are to provide greatness for the department. As to colonial history, this place will have enough unto its needs. [laughter] But you see again, you couldn't catch up with Harvard in American colonial history. Well, that's how it happened.

Now why I was invited to come to Berkeley isn't clear, except in this case I don't think it was because I was confused with my father. But I was given a very good offer. I was happy at Iowa--

Lage: Who made the contacts with you?

Riasanovsky: I don't remember. Oh, yes, perhaps George Guttridge, who was chairman.

Lage: You were happy where you were, but?

Riasanovsky: But this was obviously a more promising place. Don't forget also that I was from Eugene, Oregon, and this was a nearer climate than what Iowa had.

Lage: And your family lived here, did they?

Riasanovsky: By that time in San Francisco. So you see, it had every advantage. I still asked Arlene, of course, what she feels and how, and she was eager to go. So we came.

Remnants of the Old Guard: Professor Kerner

Riasanovsky: I was not invited here unanimously, obviously, because Kerner called me in--Kerner was a truly remarkable and impossible person in some ways, although he deserves credit for building up Russian studies.

Lage: Was he impossible on a personal level?

Riasanovsky: Well, I'll tell you. He called me in, in this Dwinelle Hall where we are located still. He was retired but had an office on the ground floor, and he said, "I want to be straight with you. I opposed your nomination for only two reasons." I said, "Yes?" "One, you're not my student. Two, I think it's better that the Anglo-Saxons teach Russian history." [laughter] He himself was born in Chicago, but a prominent member of the Czech community. Perhaps that's why he thought Anglo-Saxons should teach--

Lage: Did this lead to a discussion with him?

Riasanovsky: Oh, no. Why should it? But another thing--and this I'm glad to record because I told two or three American historians to record it in American intellectual history or it will be lost. Again, shortly after our first discussion, I got a note from him that he wants to see me. So I went back. And he was very upset. Walking up and down and muttering something like, "They didn't invite me, they didn't invite me."

Well, finally he settled down, and what happened was this. There was some special occasion at the Hoover Institution, and they didn't invite him. And he said, "Do you know how the Hoover Library and Archives were formed?" And I said, "Well, I really don't, but I mean I've heard of Hoover and the relief administration and so on." "Yes, well,

I'll tell you," he said. Now a great event in his life was that he was on Woodrow Wilson's Commission for Eastern Europe and the Treaty of Versailles. That, I'm told, came out in every lecture he gave [laughter]. And he said, "I was in charge of Eastern Europe, and Hoover came up and he said, 'Professor Kerner, I think of gathering materials. You know, moments pass and we see such historic events; how should I proceed?'" And Kerner said, "I have three wastebaskets which would be always full of material. Send someone in to collect my wastepaper baskets." And that's how the Hoover Institution was founded [laughter].

Now you don't need to ask why he was a difficult or strange person. And you know, such people have great power, because as he was saying that I started looking at his present wastepaper baskets. I'm thinking, What will that produce? [laughter]

Lage: Well, he was one of the figures that Gene Brucker talks about as the old guard.

Riasanovsky: Well, yes, to put it nicely. Gene generally puts things nicely.

Lage: Did he make life difficult for you, given his opposition to your appointment?

Riasanovsky: No, not at all.

Lage: At least he was honest.

Riasanovsky: Yes, yes, and he was already out of the department, and they were very happy to have him out. He made life easy for me because no matter what I did it was better than Kerner [laughter]. I got for several years letters, Why did Professor Kerner do that to me? And I would answer and say, I promise not to do that to you [laughter]. But, by comparison, I was just the department's darling, you know.

Lage: [laughter] Yes, I can imagine.

Riasanovsky: So this is the Kerner story. The best defense of Kerner was made, in some sense, by his student and prominent professor, now retiring from Indiana, Charles Jelavich. He was professor here and then went to Indiana. And he got his doctorate with Kerner. His wife got her doctorate with Sontag, but he got his with Kerner. He says that Kerner was bearable, even all right, even pleasant, until the Soviet occupation of Czechoslovakia. I told you that he was a very

prominent Czech-American. He believed after the Second World War that there would be a democratic Czechoslovakia, and things will work out. And then of course it collapsed. And that is what shook him. And then he started seeing communists everywhere. But I don't believe this explanation.

Lage: Oh, this is Jelavich, but not you.

Riasanovsky: Such things start much earlier; you cannot get this formation of the Hoover Library on the basis of the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia. And once one of our football players, came down in tears to the dean of men. He said, "Professor Kerner was lecturing, and he said, 'And I know who's here that Soviet spies sent to watch me,' and he was looking straight at me!" [laughter]

Lage: Is this a true story? [laughter]

Riasanovsky: I'm told it is.

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Lage: I have heard stories about Kerner, but I hadn't realized that this communist mania was part of it.

Riasanovsky: Well, you know, that's actually a very intelligent defense by Jelavich. But not good enough when you have a character that remarkable [laughter].

Lage: Was he typical of the Berkeley department of ten years before you came?

Riasanovsky: He was not typical, but he created great enormous trouble, and there were other people, and there were great fights. That's what I'm told. But you see, both Gene Brucker and I-- and at the same time, more or less, Bill Bouwsma and Brentano--came right at the very tail end of it. So you see I can tell you two stories of a retired person. And I want to go on record as saying that we had a remarkably harmonious department throughout my stay.

Lage: So you probably came after what Gene refers to as the titanic battle.

Riasanovsky: Yes, I'm giving you some elements of the titanic battle. Well, Lantzeff, for instance, was told by Kerner, "On all those department votes, when I raise my hand then raise yours." [laughter]

Lage: Was that kind of thing pretty well abolished by the time you came?

Riasanovsky: Kerner was gone.

Professors Sontag and Bridenbaugh

Lage: Was he the only one, though?

Riasanovsky: No, no. [Carl] Bridenbaugh did much to try to pull the department up, and he was one of these people who had it in his head--and certainly there had to be some notes, though I don't know, perhaps not, because I keep so very much in my head, and perhaps he was the same way. I wouldn't be able to tell. But he kept rating all the history departments all the time.

Lage: Rating other schools?

Riasanovsky: Yes, and as well as our own. He would start early, too. So when I would be here at eight-thirty or nine o'clock, he would stick his head out of the door and say, "And Michigan is going down, and don't I like it!" [laughter] I have no idea what had happened to Michigan; someone left, maybe.

Lage: It sounds like he made this a real concern.

Riasanovsky: Yes. He also was quite a man in some ways. He was for improving the department. [Raymond J.] Sontag was a very different type of person, but in some sense more ominous.

Lage: Tell me about Sontag.

Riasanovsky: Yes, I have his chair, the Sidney Hellman Ehrman professorship of European History. He was a first-rate historian and a first-rate intellect, the only limitation being that he did not publish enough. He was a specialist in diplomatic history, a huge man; he liked to say what counts is a man's stature. Well, he had stature. He received his knighthood--he was a very strong Catholic; a strong, right-wing intelligent Catholic.

Lage: Really? Right wing?

Riasanovsky: Well, I'm talking about in the church. I'm pretty sure that he did not approve of the Second Vatican on many points, and

so on. Of course he stayed within the church. Well, he became a Knight of Saint Gregory, one of the highest orders, and I congratulated him, and he said, "You can just imagine me on a horse, leading." And I said, "Perfectly." [laughter]

To give you Sontag's ability, I was writing my history of Russia--the first edition came out in 1963, and I asked his advice, his opinion, everything, on several pages on the summer of 1939--he was one of the specialists on it. He was also a stylist. His English is beautiful; that's true of much of our department. (Brentano's is remarkable.) So he made some suggestions and corrections; he didn't rewrite as much as a paragraph, but a few sentences, a few words elsewhere.

And it read much better, so I was happy. I went to sleep, and I woke up in the middle of the night. That happens to me very rarely. I went back to the rewriting, and the meaning had changed. The issue is whether the Soviet Union could have made agreement at that point with France and Great Britain and what that would have meant. And I--and this is not original at all with me--took kind of an open stance on it. It could have happened, both sides didn't know what to do, Germany was acting very decisively. But with Sontag's changing of an adjective or an article, I got the impression the Soviet Union misled the Allies.

Lage: This is what Sontag put down.

Riasanovsky: Yes. So I decided to take that out. By about two in the morning I took every word out that he put in. Later when it came out I gave him the book. We never discussed the matter. But you see what I mean.

Lage: Very clever, also.

Riasanovsky: Enormously. Enormously.

Lage: He was involved in government service also, wasn't he?

Riasanovsky: Yes. He was in the CIA [Central Intelligence Agency], and he returned to Berkeley eventually, because finally he simply had to stay in the government or go back to school. I should also say that I am sure he was honest. That's how it looked to him. And it's a possible position, but I think it's a wrong position, and also--as a tricky and extreme position--it is least desirable in a textbook. So you see this is how Sontag helped me.

Lage: This is one time when you were thinking in the middle of the night.

Riasanovsky: Yes, I sleep through nights and never wake up, and this time, when I did, I thought, What is wrong [laughter]? Well, he was one of the great battlers and he--

Lage: A battler for?

Riasanovsky: For hiring only the best people in the department. He and Bridenbaugh made an alliance--I'm told; I wasn't there-- trying to get rid of bad people, appoint only good people, that's--

Lage: Well, your hiring must have been a result of this.

Riasanovsky: Oh, I'm always grateful. But the point is that Bridenbaugh was a very tough character. I can give you just one example that I'm sure is so: it comes from Charles Jelavich; I wasn't there, it was still before I came. Jim King--James King--was chairman of the department, and James King was a fine specialist in Latin America, who was also an editor of one of the leading periodicals but did little else. He was very much a gentleman and sort of a soft person. They had to push him to force certain dismissals and appointments. And once Bridenbaugh made a tremendous attack on King. He and Charles Jelavich were walking back together, and Charles said, "Look, Carl, his wife is dying of cancer. Couldn't you take it easy?" To which Bridenbaugh said, "So what? My first wife died of cancer." [laughter]

Lage: He was a tough character. It was a little vicious.

Riasanovsky: Yes, there were great battles, indeed.

Lage: And King was actually chairman of the department.

Riasanovsky: Yes, before it got rich.

But Bridenbaugh was a first-rate scholar, thinking always of Harvard, and he gave a dreadful presidential address to the American Historical Association. He tried quotes in four or five languages, missed all of them, more or less [chuckle]. But tried to be sort of super cultured--

Lage: Was that during his tenure here at Berkeley?

Riasanovsky: Just a year after. And because he left angrily with us, he didn't want to be listed at all from Berkeley, so it was

Brown. People always accuse him of bigotry--probably rightly, though that I should check before saying so firmly. He was upset by all these Jewish city people now in American intellectual history.

Lage: So why did he leave? I thought he just left to get back to the East.

Riasanovsky: Well, he got a very good offer there, and by that time we were tired of him. In fact, I was then vice chairman. Delmer Brown was chairman. It was right in the chairman's office. He was talking with Bridenbaugh on the telephone. He was trying to talk him into not leaving. And it went on, and I just sat there, and then after the conversation Delmer said, "You know, Nick, the more he talks, the more I wish he would leave." [laughter] So he left, telling Bouwsma and me that it's up to us two to raise the department.

Lage: You said he left angrily. Did he not get a higher offer from here?

Riasanovsky: He got a very good offer. But you know he had a chair here. Brown is a very good university; it's not the University of California. I'm pretty sure if he had it completely his way --by that time, he had broken with Sontag. They became great enemies. The first meeting, when Bridenbaugh wasn't here, Sontag walked out with me and said, "How nice. A whole meeting and I wasn't insulted." [laughter]

So you see this was the time of great battles, and since then it's been remarkably peaceful. I'm even suspicious that I have too rosy a view of it. There is a small boy--now he's no longer there; I think he left even the area--in our parish who used to say, "Everyone likes me because I'm so good." [laughter] Well, that's how I talk [laughter].

Lage: After this transition, shall we call it, and a few people left and retired--

Riasanovsky: And many came in. It was expanding all the time. Oh, by the way, if you like stories, one of the most remarkable and great historians was, of course, Woodrow Borah. Woodrow Borah despised Bridenbaugh, and after Bridenbaugh's talk to the AHA, Borah gave this talk for an analysis to his seminar.

I rarely act on impulse; I always try to think. But I ran in, I said, "Woodrow, you cannot do that." He said, "Nicholas, we must learn from our betters." [laughter] But that remarkable period was over, and I've had on the whole a

very, very happy time in the department, although some of it was difficult. I was chairman during part of the student movement.

Berkeley in the Fifties, and Now

Lage: Yes, and I want to get into that later, but let's get a little more about this earlier period. Tell me--just to get away from the department, look at Berkeley as a whole--what was it like to come here and put down roots.

Riasanovsky: It was, as I say, now our daughter Maria insists she is a westerner. I never insist on that, but I had been before to the Bay Area. That was very fine--

Lage: Did you live here in Berkeley from the beginning?

Riasanovsky: Yes. Well, we first rented a house, strictly speaking, in Oakland--on Hillegass Avenue, just across the line from Berkeley.

Lage: And were the children all born here?

Riasanovsky: No, John was born in Iowa, and the other two, Nick and Maria, were born here.

Lage: Did the people in the department make the transition easy or are you on your own? Socially, I'm thinking.

Riasanovsky: Perhaps my wife is a better specialist on that. It was not as close as, let's say, in Iowa. Even geographically; people live in different places. As you say, "Everyone likes me because I'm so good." [laughter] So I have no harsh memories at all.

Lage: Was Berkeley a different place in '57 from now? How do you remember it?

Riasanovsky: Well, for example, no street people. Much better looking, more prosperous. I am accustomed to street people in China, but was surprised when they appeared here. I think by the way--I hope I'm wrong--that the happy age of the department may be over precisely because of what you mentioned, when financially it's tough. Now I'm in this wonderful position of writing my own ticket [as professor of graduate studies], and part of the ticket is not to attend department meetings

and bother with appointments and so on. It's right, I mean, I think of Kerner and others and how they would try to appoint their students. So I don't have any precise information, but nevertheless I have the feeling that things are much tougher now, and some younger people feel they don't have as happy a future as we more or less assumed. But, even then, it's much better than other schools or almost all other schools. I think in fact that we are doing very well in appointments. [Chancellor Chang-Lin] Tien keeps bragging about it; he has some right to do so. Because relatively, we are still doing well; not because we are doing well.

It's difficult to calculate such things, but I remember when our budget was down 4 percent or 5 percent, I don't know, and I went to commencement at Oregon, and there it was down 12 percent. And of course they had less to begin with.

Lage: Even Stanford seems--

Riasanovsky: Yes, Stanford is behaving strangely at the moment, but I think--again, I wouldn't cry for them. Occasionally you hear good news. I think Texas Christian is doing well; I don't know why. We get all this news--sometimes in great detail--because of placing people. Utah is doing well, but almost the entire country is not. By the way, my own liking for the Southwest over the years--well, it's an important part of the country; I'm not simply running it down, but one special asset is that we kept placing people there, where there were no jobs in New England, and we had the growing Arizona and the Texas schools and so on. But basically it's much tougher now. I think also, as you know, we have a kind of a crisis on affirmative action. And that's a difficult issue.

Continuity in History

Lage: When you look at this history of the time when you've been here, it sounds as if you don't see any major turning points until towards the end of your career.

Riasanovsky: For several reasons. First of all, it's a very real reason. For instance--let's leave affirmative action out of it for a moment, although it may also belong here--when people say it was a great student movement, what were the results? Virtually none, if you think of how the university functions. So where would you find a turning point?

It had its ridiculous aspects to it. I remember I was chairman--

Lage: You were chairman '67 to '69, was it?

Riasanovsky: Yes. In any case, I received a phone call: he wanted to talk to the chairman of the History Department of the University of California. I said, "Yes, I'll take this call." I think it was Florida or Florida State, or perhaps Southern Florida, I don't remember. He said, "You are chairman?" "Yes." "How do students participate in the governance of your department?" I said, "They don't." "Is this Berkeley?" I said, "Yes." "How do students participate in the governance--" "They don't." [laughter]

It's true. For instance, in some schools search committees have students; ours don't. Not saying it's right or wrong.

Lage: Was there ever a move to put them on?

Riasanovsky: Oh, sure. At the time, I mean, we were a republic or whatever with red and black flags flying [laughter]. So, where would you find a turning point?

Another reason why I do not see turning points is because of the nature of history. There is of course evolution; for instance, if I was beginning now, I would certainly learn computers, although in my particular field of history, intellectual history, they mean little even now. I'm not saying they're totally useless. What fascinates me is that you can store so much in so little space.

But the point is that that's a major technical improvement. Also, of course, it's not new. People who were in economics and so on were doing that sort of thing for decades. But there are ups and downs. For instance, in my generation--speaking of when I was young--psychoanalysis was very important, and I paid some serious attention to it. It is less so now. So I'm not saying it's all the same.

It also has a certain circular quality. I remember again in this office a graduate student in medieval history, a woman who was doing some work with me, coming in and saying she was so excited; she was at her first meeting of a seminar in medieval history, and this seminar will be only about common people. No rulers, no church, just the people. And I remembered my father said that the best seminar he had had

was Vinogradov's at the University of Moscow--the great medievalist. It was about the common people.

So because of all these reasons, it's true that I believe in continuity, and I don't see any great changes. They obviously happen in other fields.

Lage: But you also mentioned--I'm just thinking about the department--just before you came, it sounds like a very different place.

Riasanovsky: Well, yes, but that was personal. It was not the intellectual structure, and not the courses. But there was a very real change in personnel and relations, should we say. But not in the field.

Lage: I see, not in the way history was taught.

Riasanovsky: Although, I don't want to produce the wrong impression that nothing changed. Obviously things develop. But there are very much--the very nature of the field is continuance. For instance, ecology became a new field more or less under my eyes. There is a great debate among our faculty about biochemistry and chemistry and the new building, and I've heard my friend, and a person I admire--Sandy Elberg--being accused of giving his name to non-scholarly enterprises. There are obviously bitter opinions on both sides. We simply don't have that.

Lage: That must have had to do with the reorganizations of the biological sciences on campus. And in history you don't have these kinds of divisions?

Riasanovsky: Yes. So then you say, Why did it seem so continuous to me? Well, as I said, because the field essentially hasn't changed, and even the position of the department has not changed, as I gave you this example, no students for good or ill [laughter] govern the department. That is quite true.

Women in the University

Lage: One difference I see now--there are a lot more women in the history department.

Riasanovsky: Fine, but long ago I assumed that women are the same as men intellectually. I look at my mother who was a professor, and my wife, and our daughter.

Lage: It is striking though that for so long there really weren't--

Riasanovsky: First of all, it's not quite that simple. Until recently we had more women on the faculty in the thirties than we do now. But that was because almost all the languages were taught by women. And they were relatively inferior in status and poorly paid. There was also--I'm told; I wasn't a faculty member in the thirties--simply the fact that a professor's position was much lower, so ambitious men less eagerly went into it. But no, I basically quite agree with you, and when I say women are the same as men intellectually, obviously they should be treated the same way. When you see in mechanical engineering--one woman, ninety-nine men [laughter]--something has got to give.

Lage: But that was the case at Berkeley in the history department. In your early years here you had only Adrienne Koch.

Riasanovsky: Yes, well, she counts for several.

Lage: [laughter] Why is that?

Riasanovsky: As Henry May said--he argued for her promotion, more or less as Saint George saving the maiden. It turned out she was the dragon [laughter].

Lage: She was hard to get along with?

Riasanovsky: But she was an impressive person. I had relatively little to do with her; she was in American history. Since I came, I know no discrimination against women in our appointment selections.

Lage: Did many women come up for consideration? I know you had a lot to do with being on the promotion and hiring committee.

Riasanovsky: More and more, yes. I always had excellent women students, and now professors. But if you want parity in groups, the situation with Chicanos, blacks, not to mention Native Americans, is much more serious. With women, I mean, I completely recognize there is discrimination--or less now, or shouldn't be--but the point is there is no inherent problem at all. Perhaps some--women have children, so you should arrange leaves of absence. But unless it's a book on feminism, and perhaps not even then, I don't know if I'm

reading a man or woman in history. I wouldn't be able to group them as students or as specialists or whatever.

Lage: And you haven't found that women tend to have a different area of interest?

Riasanovsky: Well, perhaps so, but not within history. I suppose there are more women in social welfare than in military strategy, but why not? By the way, I am of two minds on the feminist movement--some of it is obviously very desirable--there is absolutely no ground for any discrimination. On the other hand, I wouldn't try to have them flying planes and fighting wars. That's one of the great advantages of women in history. They may just as well keep it.

Seriously, it's true that obviously men dominated most societies we know--even sort of matriarchal prehistoric societies, I'm very suspicious of them; we have very little information and so on. On the other hand, one advantage for women is simply that they didn't have to fight wars. It's a tremendous advantage. I was, as you know, three years in the army, and I think rightly so.

But I had women students from the start, and I repeat, the good point is that this was not in any sense an issue.

Lage: Did you have any more trouble placing your women students than your men students?

Riasanovsky: That's difficult to say. First of all, I was very lucky--as usual, I suppose.

Lage: Because you're so nice--or good [laughter].

Riasanovsky: Oh, of course [laughter]. But the point is that every one of my Ph.D.s was placed. So "percentages not placed" don't exist.

Lage: But where were they placed?

Riasanovsky: Well, that's one question. Secondly, it's also true that I can look around me and not everyone was placed otherwise. My opinion now would be that I don't know. Or at least I suppose if the anti-affirmative action bill passes perhaps I'll change my mind. But at the moment, speaking very vaguely, I think our women are at least as well off as men. It depends when, it depends who. I've known people very eager to place women, precisely because they don't have

enough in a department. That to me is also a wrong view; just place best people.

Or again, Maria, our daughter, interviewed at Princeton Presbyterian Seminary, which is not part of Princeton, but it's a famous institution in its own case. The dean was a woman. She comes in and says, "Maria, a woman! How wonderful, for all these men keep coming all the time!" [laughter] And she phoned and said, "Papa, what am I to say?" I said, "Say nothing at all. Some will be against you, some for you, just do your job and don't worry about it."

So my guess is there are pulls both ways. That's why I say vaguely that the chances are probably even. Probably the best universities are more eager to have women. There may be, I don't know them, some universities--at Harvard we used to frighten each other with North Dakota Teachers' College--which perhaps still somehow think that a woman would be disruptive; we are all men, and so on. And how it balances out, I don't know.

Lage: In the earlier period, though, it seems like very few women were hired--say, shortly after you came, into the early sixties.

Riasanovsky: But you know, there are always fewer candidates. It's completely true with minorities. For instance, a really able black would have the best opportunity even today to be placed. And we fight with Harvard for the one or two who can make it at this level. So you have to judge against the pool, and that's why it's so good that now it's becoming, not quite even in our department, but there are almost as many women graduate students.

Lage: Really?

Riasanovsky: Graduate students, I'm saying. Perhaps 40 percent.

Lage: So the pool has had a lot to do with it.

Riasanovsky: Basically, I mean, that's where you get them. I did see some discrimination that surprised me. Especially earlier and especially when it comes with very good people. I remember in Iowa we had a discussion with my colleague--well, a group of us with a colleague--about a fellowship. And it came out to give it to a man or to a woman, and he was in favor of giving it to a man because he said, "Well, she'll get married, and we'll never have any profit from it." And that

was the time of the Korean War, and I said, "Wait a minute. A man may become a priest, a man may be killed in Korea. Generally, that's not our business." I remember I was very surprised, because in my family background this would be impossible.

Lage: That's true, you came from a--

Riasanovsky: From a Russian intellectual family. Both parents were professors and intellectuals. And I repeat, the man who said that was excellent--he was not some kind of a hick or otherwise very stubborn person or extreme right-winger at all.

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Lage: Let's record what you were saying as I changed the tape, that you found fellowships for both the man and the woman at Iowa.

Riasanovsky: Yes. I also like to believe this is a kind of irreversible movement because it's so natural. As I say again--I remember one enthusiast wanted a Native American in theoretical physics. He's still waiting. Part of why this issue becomes so bitter is because the kind of assumption in a secular society is that the highest thing is to be a professor or to be a physicist. And I don't know a single major religion that goes by IQs. Or again, speaking of Spanish culture, which is of course a great culture, if Chicanos do not want to go to school, why should they?

Lage: And yet it is a traditional method of advancement in our society.

Riasanovsky: Well, what we call advancement--that's just the point. And I understand why people are so worried about it, but this is not a moral judgment. I don't think there is also much problem in the sense that, whether you take Chicanos or blacks or whatever, they are completely within the general range of people. If they were some sort of strange individuals who never can learn math, that would be different. So finally if somehow we could have a society that would treat everyone properly, without discrimination, we will be fine.

Lage: Now let's see. We've ranged over the waterfront.

Riasanovsky: Yes, well, the waterfront may be advancing.

The Appointment Process: A Thorough Evaluation of a Candidate's Writing

Lage: I want you to talk a little bit about that generation of faculty that came in about the time you did and shortly after.

Riasanovsky: Yes, well, we already mentioned some of the remarkable people in the generation, people like Bob Brentano, Gene Brucker, Bill Bouwsma, and I think especially what their record is today--it was less clear then--but it makes selection a little more worthy and worthwhile. It was a real effort to find the absolutely best people, and they succeeded.

Lage: Now you participated in the hiring process.

Riasanovsky: Not of these people. Later I participated for years in various capacities, appointment committees, selection committees, chairman, vice chairman, etcetera.

Lage: How did you go about finding the right person--

Riasanovsky: It's actually not that difficult.

Lage: It seems like the key to the success of the department so we should--

Riasanovsky: Of course, absolutely. But it's not that difficult because good people aren't that many at that level. There is much nonsense said and written about club ties and cabals and so on. I haven't met any, and now I've been professor since '49. I think that basically the search is completely open and completely honest. I think that at Berkeley at least, I would say that probably with great hope to find more women, although this is becoming less of a minority, and more blacks--I don't know a single case of discrimination on that ground.

We all read books, and that's what we do when we hire people. Sometimes if it's a beginning appointment, you read dissertations not yet published, or even chapters of dissertations.

Lage: Now that would be the most frequent case, would it not?

Riasanovsky: Now, but there was a time when we hired top people. Two of them if both were very good. But this is the most frequent case. So I think also we do go by the reading. I think that

in a sense it may be unfair to teaching, but again much nonsense is said about teaching. We discussed that before. And teaching also is very much more difficult to establish, objectively. Because I told you that if you follow some of our education schools, you should summarize the first five minutes what you're going to say, you should summarize another five minutes what you said, you shouldn't have more than one idea in a paragraph. That way we would all be very far behind.

And I told you for instance why I consider Berlin such an important teacher, although by most objective standards he was impossible. I am not trying to get rid of this idea because of course teaching is enormously important. Look at how much of my own life I spent teaching. But it's difficult to measure, so what it amounts to is that unless there is some more or less obvious deficiency--usually people are invited to give a talk--if someone obviously cannot speak loudly, obviously cannot express himself--teaching is covered. And that's how it boils down to the writing. And the writing is not the same for all people. In fact, at the high level of writing, no two pieces are the same.

Lage: So for you, at least, a careful look at the person's production, their writing--

Riasanovsky: Yes, ideally you should read all of it. And that's why it's so difficult to be chairman of the department, because presumably you read everything before you recommend. Independently--that's part of Cal's system. You want a separate statement from the chairman.

Lage: In hiring?

Riasanovsky: Yes.

Lage: So when you were chairman you would read--

Riasanovsky: Yes, well, that was in that sense a very hard time. I had no time really left to worry whether the university was going down or up.

Lage: Or for your own work, I would think.

Riasanovsky: I have this ability to work in small bits. That is what it amounts to.

Lage: Now what about the recommendations of your own network of acquaintances or other people on the committee?

Riasanovsky: Everyone is supposed to have letters of recommendation. That is also very important. Some of the letters are excellent. At the same time, over a period of time, that's why this is generally a long-term job, and you improve as you go along. But you realize, for instance, some people in the profession overpraise their students. Shamelessly, if you want to put it that way. The great case I think I might mention to you was not in history, but in literature, linguistics, culture-- Roman Jakobson, the great linguist. Every student of his was a genius, and there was a reason for it: because he himself was writing the dissertation in his mind. Because it became genius as he handled it, but nevertheless what we got was students, not Jakobson. So there was that kind of check.

But I think that in general we are also a good department at trying to find people where we can. One indication is that some of our Ph.D.'s are not from the top schools. For instance, [Jon] Gjerde is from the University of Minnesota. He is completely on the level with the others. But that means that we read his Minnesota dissertation, we put it ahead of thirty Ivy League dissertations.

Lage: It had shown through, the quality of his mind.

Riasanovsky: Yes. And that's how it works. When I came--partly because of preceding battles--there was a strong feeling against appointing California Ph.D.'s. Partly because of inbreeding--which is a bad expression, but in any case, as Kerner said, he didn't vote for me because I'm not his student. I was very much against that reluctance to hire Berkeley Ph.D.'s, because I think that this is as much discrimination as race or anything else. You simply got to take the quality. Now if what you are afraid of is that student is just like his teacher and has no ideas of his own, of course rule him out; you don't want anyone who had no ideas of his own, from Cal or anywhere else.

Lage: Did other historians that you served with on the committees take the same approach as you? To read as carefully--

Riasanovsky: Basically, yes. Some are very fast readers, I suspected, but basically, sure. And it's by far the best system. After someone is recommended, or perhaps two people, whatever, then the entire department tries to read before the meeting. Things are xeroxed--in fact, we had some very remarkable participation from people who were not on the committee. I know a couple of cases where the candidates were destroyed by comments from the floor.

Lage: So you really go into each one--

Riasanovsky: Sure, and that's it. And that's how we came to be listed as number one department--we have been for years, although sometimes tied with Yale. Yale seems to be our main companion. And I don't say that we are indeed number one--what it means is that we are one of the best departments, that's true.

There can be debates about methodology. I remember a candidate, who was rather an extreme proponent of psychoanalysis, that some historians recommended for a name chair, and some people rebelled against it. Especially at this high level of appointment you need more agreement, so he was not offered the chair. But that's legitimate.

Personally, I'm in favor of psychoanalysis; I think it's valid. At the same time, it has enormous limitations. And the main limitation is that you cannot move from the individual to the group. Erich Fromm and others tried; I think they failed.

Lage: So you might explain an individual's actions, but not--

Riasanovsky: But not beyond that. And when you speak about German inferiority complex, it's nonsense. Only an individual German can have an inferiority complex. So some might consider this is not the kind of historian we want to have, that's legitimate.

Lage: Were there other concerns, like the emphasis on intellectual versus social versus political--

Riasanovsky: That's something else, and it's very important. Again, it's an issue of history. You simply have to cover the field, at least so I feel, for a great major university. Of course now we do need a Byzantine historian; I don't know when we'll get him, but it's a tremendous period, let's say from Constantine, 306 to 337, to the fall of Byzantium in 1453, and has had enormous influence since. If we don't have a Byzantine historian--we've had several, and we lost them in various ways. Soulis died suddenly, Alexander died--not suddenly--Peter Brown went to Princeton. We simply are clearly less good than a department that has it. Now we may be better in other respects and so on, but there is no doubt that you have to cover major things.

Lage: Would that be a matter of difference of opinion in the department?

Riasanovsky: Yes. Difference of opinion--I don't think anyone would be absolutely against Byzantine history, but what priority it gets. Do we need a Byzantine historian more than a sixth American historian, or a tenth? I must say I'm not bitter about department decisions; they usually make sense.

Another interesting situation, for example, is we had an African historian--we have now--but one is usually not enough really to train graduate students. Even though, of course, as usual, one reason why this is such a good place, there are African sociologists, political scientists, anthropologists, but, nevertheless, you need preferably two if you want to have a field. At least two. So do we need a second African historian more than we need the Byzantinist or whatever?

So that's all a very difficult problem, but you need coverage. This is where I disagreed in some ways with an extremely able man to whom I probably owe my present position of Professor of Graduate Studies: John Heilbron. Heilbron is essentially a scientist. And in science--science has apparently evolved much more rapidly--he would be and was, I suppose, as vice chancellor, much more active than I would ever dare to be or want to be in sort of shaping the field. And he would say, "What we now need is the Pacific Rim and not Byzantium." I have the highest regard for John Heilbron, but I disagree completely on that point. He knows it too.

Lage: So he would inject his opinion into the history department.

Riasanovsky: Well, he was a member of it. And a very valuable member.

Lage: But he was the vice chancellor.

Riasanovsky: Yes. I think what he could do is state his opinion. If the history department didn't follow it, I suppose he did his arranging mostly with history of science. But he has essentially a kind of scientific mentality, and history of science was his field--he is a great historian of it--and in science, earlier periods are gone and superseded. They never are in history. That we have now, let's say, a great European community, doesn't lead to more or less--if anything, I suppose, more--regard for the Roman Empire. There is no way you can get rid of it, while you might say, now we teach a different physics.

Lage: I wouldn't think you could with history of science, either.

Riasanovsky: No, that's why I say my criticism is moderated.

Lage: I can see as you talk that when you come down to the times when it's either/or, because of budget limitations, it is a much more difficult situation than when you get two good professors and say, "Let's take them both."

Riasanovsky: And that, by the way, is rare anyplace. This is simply an example of our riches.

Lage: When was that? When did that happen?

Riasanovsky: Oh, it happened several times.

Lage: Oh, I see; it wasn't just Schorske and Rosenberg.

Riasanovsky: No, no. I suppose few other places can do it, especially over a period of years. For example, Yale has been really strapped, and they're our main rival. They lost a couple of people who were absolutely first-rate because they couldn't promote them. They lost very much invested money on the stock exchange, I think, at one point.

Here again, I'm very much with Cal. As I said, the Liberal Arts College at Yale wanted to promote people, and that year there were no promotions at Yale. Robert Crummey went to [University of California at] Davis, incidentally, in Russian History.

Promotions to Tenure: California and the Ivy League

Riasanovsky: But in addition to that, the Ivy League schools, quite on purpose have many junior people who cannot be promoted, because there are very few permanent positions.

Lage: Because that is their system?

Riasanovsky: Yes. And they feel that gives them the best choice. Until recently at least, these people always got jobs elsewhere. If you aren't promoted at Harvard you go to a variety of other places. But nevertheless, by definition then, perhaps 20 percent or less can be promoted. That still gives a chance to find a genius or whatever.

In our system everyone can be promoted. And I much prefer our system. It doesn't mean that everyone is promoted. Promoted--now we're talking about tenure; this of course is crucial. When I was chairman I used to keep score

and about 50 percent were. But simply because in 50 percent of the cases, there were either real deficiencies in the people, or other people whom we could get who were clearly better. So promotion was open to everyone.

But Bridenbaugh, by the way, one of the reasons he left perhaps, was he wanted to introduce the Yale/Harvard system here, too. And we voted it down.

Lage: Well, that was a crucial decision.

Riasanovsky: It's of course crucial.

Lage: Do you remember when that would have been?

Riasanovsky: It was during my first years, let's say, '57 to '65, because it came up a couple of times in various forms; a committee was considering it or the department.

I was also during that time for a year a visiting professor at Harvard. And it was an interesting year. We used to meet and Robert Wolfe was then chairman, and I would be sitting next to him--the department has lunch every month or every two weeks or whatever--and we would talk. The line was almost always that the two best are the University of California and Harvard--and that's what we do, and that's what you do. By the way, what the best universities are is of course obvious to some academics. I was offered a name chair--I have one here, but then I didn't--at Yale. I was at the time in Paris and flew to Yale and spent several days there. And there, Pierson, historian at Yale and of Yale started explaining things to me: what they do at Yale, and what would be done and so on. He was comparing things, and the first part of the comparison was Yale, but the second wasn't California. Then I realized the second was Harvard.

Lage: His only point of reference was Yale versus Harvard.

Riasanovsky: Of course. Nothing else. Because I had been to Harvard, I finally figured it out.

This time, though, our two references were California and Harvard, where I was teaching that year. It is a complicated business to compare the two--who works more, I think, for example--and I would often talk about it to Bailyn, who is more or less my age--in many ways they were better off partly because they have fewer committees, and they bother only about promotion or appointment to tenure. We have all the time committee service. On the other hand,

at Harvard every student writes an individual essay for graduation, and they read them. Bailyn was that year in charge of this essay function, so--

But this time I was talking with Wolfe, and he said, "Can you think of some other differences?" And I said without thinking, "Well, you know, of course at Cal everyone can be promoted. Not as here." I suddenly realized that there was a table of people who were being let go. I could have started a revolution in Cambridge, Massachusetts, at that point.

Lage: You mean this was news to them?

Riasanovsky: No, no. But the fact is that they were being dismissed. It's one of those moments in my life when I wish so much I hadn't spoken [laughter].

Lage: It sounds to me like it was something worth saying.

Riasanovsky: In any case, I prefer our system in that respect, too.

Lage: We should probably wind up because I know you have something to get on to, and we'll continue next week.

VI THOUGHTS ON THE DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY

[Interview 5: March 6, 1996]##

Quality and Professionalism

Lage:

Today is March sixth, 1996, and this is the fifth session of the oral history of Professor Riasanovsky.

I would like to start by just asking you if you had any thoughts occasioned by the session we both just went to on the history of the history department at Berkeley [March 4, 1996].

Riasanovsky:

Yes, I have thought about it. It was a good session; very much was covered, and especially because our listeners and readers of this oral history were not at this session, I would like to emphasize some points which are my own appreciation of the department.

It is of course a very good department and has been very good ever since I remember it, although it has also improved. We had a few older people who were not very good. I am referring to some Bolton students and so on. And some of them were still there when I came, but here of course I want to make the point that some of the old people also were very good. Our era was not the first time that good people appeared here at California.

So the first point is that it's an excellent department. I think Henry May said at this session that while he doesn't know if it's first, second, third, that it's not particularly relevant. And I agree with that. I think some of these ratings are very vague, and at the same time, interestingly, usually fall behind chronologically because people think of a

famous historian in the department who has retired or is about to retire--

Lage: You mean the ratings don't keep up with the current--

Riasanovsky: Yes, in other words you always really rate several years earlier in many ways. So it's not a matter of who is second, who is third, but the fact is of course we have been one of the best departments in this country, and I suppose that means in the world, although I'm not saying that other countries don't have excellent departments. Often it's difficult to compare because of the structure of education and so on. So it's really excellent. It has been very highly professional. I both like and dislike the word "professional." I also dislike intensely the word "career."

Lage: What do you mean by "professional" that you like and dislike?

Riasanovsky: What I like, and that's what I want to emphasize when I say "professional" is that people are really trained, prepared, and devoted to what they are doing. And--I'm not now speaking of the subconscious or of human nature, but broadly speaking, of education, preparation and attitude. I entirely agree in my own experience that it's absolutely crucial, of course, that we have appointments and promotions: who will be in the department. We may even be too careful on that because, for example, Harvard has really full reviews only for appointment or promotion to tenure. We sort of keep reviewing people all the time. This is done exceptionally well. I don't know of a single case where I thought it was done for some special interests or whatever. Always, of course, in the framework of what appointment is available and what for. But, for instance, if it's a visitor for a year, the picture is different; we very often have someone to cover German history while Feldman is gone. It's not the same as, you see, the best German historian in the country.

And I think also that is characteristic of the profession--again, another version of the same word--that it does mean very much. People so often talk about cabals, cliques, interests--you like women or you don't like women--and they remind me of people who at a concert start counting chairs because they don't know music. And if you know music, music comes first. This is how the department has operated.

Lage: So do you think that the cabals and cliques have not existed in this department?

Riasanovsky: They were entirely secondary or subsumed in this more important historical interest.

Lage: Things were thrashed out on a professional level?

Riasanovsky: Oh, yes. Also, at least in my own experience, I have known people I disliked--intensely even--who are fine historians. I have known all kinds of good and well-meaning people who couldn't make it, so I suppose again the music [analogy]--someone who plays the piano well or badly, and he may be nasty or he may be very kind; that is a different matter.

Lage: So you need to separate the personal from the professional.

Riasanovsky: Yes. So that's another great aspect of the department. First, quality; a professional nature. By the way, I don't like "professional" if it's used again to indicate career as a kind of a go-go-go and attain something. I don't like the expression saying that if someone takes a job--in one case from Iowa to Oregon, that he is "going down the ladder." This is, well, basically nonsense. For instance, when you read a good book, you don't know whether it's from Michigan or Oregon.

Freedom in Pursuing Scholarly Interests

Riasanovsky: First, then, the discussion at the History of History session emphasized quality and professional procedure and structure of the department. Another great asset we mentioned in this discussion is generally great freedom; people do what they want. And people start doing what they want as they join the department, in the sense that they very often of course have the Ph.D., and if they don't, they get it soon after joining, and at that point they can have seminars, graduate work, and they can structure their courses very differently.

Lage: They can structure them as they wish?

Riasanovsky: Yes.

Lage: Is there any guidance?

Riasanovsky: There is guidance--but only most general. A European historian teaches Europe and not Latin America. A general lecture course is different from directing doctoral dissertations.

And we have very different historians as to type. I think perhaps Gene Brucker is too lyric on how wonderfully we absorbed so many new trends and so on. He tends to do that. But I'm perhaps more lyric in the sense that I said we had good trends to begin with. This is another great asset.

Lage: What I would be curious--I don't want to interrupt the thought that you have--how did these things come about? Apparently this freedom to study what you wish and design your courses is not universal. Was this here when you arrived?

Riasanovsky: Yes, although it's quite possible it was here just as I arrived. You heard at the session about great battles of the Age of Titans before I came, but--

Lage: Do you think the freedom to choose what you study and teach might have been a reaction against these titans?

Riasanovsky: Yes, and I think that even some of the titans were good historians. I don't know exactly where it started. It's partly the nature of the university. Recently a doctoral candidate I know well was interviewed at Providence, which is a Dominican school--I think it's the only Dominican university in the country, but whether it is the only one I cannot swear--but there obviously it's very much more programmed.

Lage: In terms of what you teach or even what you--

Riasanovsky: What you teach, what you take; things are regulated much more. At the same time another college--in this case Claremont--has simply no guidelines. You do what you can. So there's a great range in our country. [phone interruption]

The Broader Setting: Many Excellent Departments at Cal

Riasanovsky: Another of the great strengths of our university is, of course, that there are so many excellent departments. For instance, Gregory Grossman, recently retired from economics. My point here is subjective, but serious--I think he is the greatest expert on the Soviet Union in the world. I'm not the only one; Congress listened to him, and so on. And he is one reason why my *History of Russia*, I think, is a good book, because he is a great contributor to the economics part on

the Soviet Union, and we have quite a number of such exceptional people in many departments.

Lage: So it's not just the history department that you're a member of.

Riasanovsky: And one thing I'm trying to tell all incoming people is that there is enormously much on the campus. You've got to look around. Similarly I had a very close association with people, let's say, in language and literature; Hugh McLean is a good example. Also I might add that several of them, quite a number, were my students, and now they're retired, and I'm still here [laughter].

Lage: How did that happen? Well, they took early retirement.

Riasanovsky: Well, yes, more or less. Somewhat early. Of course, when I began teaching, the graduate students were older than I was, but that was long ago.

So another great asset is the nature of the university.

Lage: Some of these things that are mentioned as being key in the history department are not unique on this campus, such as you mentioned the decision to promote from within. That's something I've heard in many departments, or maybe even a campus policy.

Riasanovsky: We blocked the effort to change that, you know; we do promote from within. There is a difference--and I had a few unpleasant surprises during my many years at Cal. For example, I was chairman of the review of the French department--actually Romance Languages, but now I think it's called French, because they have also Italian and the Iberian languages--and I discovered there that beginners have a much harder time. Partly, I suppose, because they had to spend much time teaching language. But they do not easily get seminars, they do not have graduate students to begin with. At that time, that had been changed partly as a result of our review, which was--

Lage: When was the review? How long ago?

Riasanovsky: I don't remember exactly; quite a few years ago. It can no doubt be established.

The tone was also different. For instance, we had meetings with the faculty, we had meetings with the graduate students, and so on. That was one of the Graduate Council

reviews. I participated in many such. We would be glad to meet with whomever to talk with and so on; well, I got a call from an assistant professor for an appointment. I said, "Let's meet this afternoon at five o'clock." He said, "No, let's meet at some out-of-the-way restaurant in Oakland."

Lage: [laughter] That tells you something right there.

Riasanovsky: Yes. At that point, the French department also had no or very few visiting speakers, and the reason given was that few people are worthy of speaking here. And in this case, I wouldn't have believed it until I served on that review.

Lage: I think Sandy Elberg talked about that review.

Riasanovsky: We all were surprised. The Spanish department had its problems--[Luis] Monguió, apparently, was a very good, first-rate scholar and so on, but he was apparently a leading Republican intellectual and great enemy of the Franco regime, and he turned down--as I remember--an applicant from the University of Madrid as not sufficiently good in Spanish [laughter]. There was also said--this is rumor--that you couldn't get promoted in the Spanish department because you were never sufficiently set in Spanish culture, and you would be turned down on that basis [laughter] so there wasn't much chance.

And it's not a rumor--though I haven't read it myself--about one hard-working member of the department, that one of his remarkable pieces was that he established what day of the week Don Quixote fought the windmill [laughter]. That is being well-set in Spanish culture. And yet they do have leading scholars; one of them I believe now is head of the Bancroft Library.

Woodrow Borah, Herbert Bolton

Riasanovsky: I came just after the Age of the Titans, and I'm not for them, but they also included some remarkable people and remarkable scholars.

And it's also very important because over the years I came to realize how important it is to have started earlier. There was this tremendous rush, and a very good rush, after the Second World War to spread education, but in some sense you don't catch up.

Lage: If you don't have something to build on. Now did you know the famous Herbert Bolton who was mentioned so many times [at the history department event]?

Riasanovsky: No.

Lage: But you knew his students.

Riasanovsky: Well, his great student, of course, is [Woodrow] Borah, who somehow did not get a job in the history department, but was in the Department of Speech (now the Department of Rhetoric).

Lage: Did he offend Bolton in some way?

Riasanovsky: I don't know, but he was absolutely first-rate. I remember a friend of mine and also a great Latin American scholar, Charles Gibson, was coming through, and I said, "Whom would you like to see? Should I arrange some meeting?" He didn't want to see anyone in the department, but he wanted very much to see Borah in Speech.

Lage: And when did Borah come into the department?

Riasanovsky: When I was vice chairman. It was my first recommendation.

Lage: Oh, so you're responsible for that.

Riasanovsky: Yes. I found what Tulio Halperin said at the meeting about Bolton devastating. Halperin is an enormously highly recommended scholar, and apparently he considered Bolton as more or less zero, from what he said. But I hadn't; I thought that Bolton was an important historian, although again of a certain kind and with some limitations.

Lage: There was another remark--I didn't get the person's name who implied that perhaps the criticism of Bolton was from the Eastern establishment rejecting the history of the West. I thought that was sort of interesting. But Tulio didn't agree with that.

Riasanovsky: Well, it seems that Bolton had nothing to offer. Unfortunately, he knows much more about it than I do, but otherwise I would have included Bolton among prominent people for his age. You know Bolton is also famous for this fake Drake's plate. So he left his mark on the campus, I'm sure.

Changes in the Curriculum

Lage: How has the curriculum changed over the years; how have new areas of history been brought in? The course offerings look very different today than they looked in 1957.

Riasanovsky: They are very different in two ways, especially. One is that there is simply so much more of it. You can for instance have a course on Vietnam--there was no course on Vietnam. And that by the way is a most important thing, because it's like having or not having history. Right now we don't have a Byzantine historian, and I think it's a tremendous minus. Everything else being equal--everything else is never equal--but everything else being equal, we are a worse history department than one that does have a Byzantine historian. So that's one way.

The other way in which things expanded is that people do teach many more small courses, and there is much greater variety of what people can do. Again, that's part of the expansion of personnel; I mean, you cannot teach small courses if you don't have enough people.

Lage: But say the change from more emphasis on political, diplomatic history to more emphasis on history of the family, history of slave culture. How did that occur? Did that occur through discussion or by this free choice of individual professors?

Riasanovsky: Here I think Henry May made perhaps the best critique about it. Very much of it is largely beyond the scope of the university; it's a national change, it's an academic change all over. Perhaps one way to put it may be too restrictive, but what we apparently have done is made good use of the opportunities; for instance, the enormous funding that it all took. Or we have some pioneers in different fields, but in many of these new fields one or two people who are especially important are scattered in different universities, sometimes outside the United States, often in the United States. So we had both the willingness and the resources to follow or to contribute to what was going on in history.

Lage: Do you recall discussions, say in search committees or personnel committees, We have to get a historian who is going to focus more on social life, for instance?

Riasanovsky: Yes, of course, that is entirely legitimate. That's one thing you always have, for instance, or diplomatic history or

whatever. In a very real sense, and that's the peculiar nature of history: one doesn't replace the other. I am told that modern physics can replace earlier physics; but not history.

Lage: So it comes from being able to expand, but not do away with anything?

Riasanovsky: Yes, and the willingness to expand--if, for example, we insist that we must continue studying above all the English roots of the United States, well, that's what we would be studying.

Lage: And part of it comes from giving freedom to your new professors, it would seem.

Riasanovsky: And also, at the same time--yes, in every way; they're also on committees and reacting to what's going on in the world. Again, I'm not saying that California is always merely a follower; California is a great contributor. But when you talk about the entire intellectual world, obviously it's one of thousands of contributors.

Again, it's also the idea of freedom. Perhaps I was lucky, that's one thing; it's certainly true that I was never an extremist, an anarchist, a communist, or what, but I never felt any problem with what I wanted to say, and I never even thought of that. So I react negatively to saying that you had to be pro-Soviet or you had to be anything--that is nonsense.

Lage: Well, has anyone said that?

Riasanovsky: This is Martin Malia's basic point--he's a very able person--that it became sort of unacceptable in liberal circles to use the term "totalitarianism". But I think he's wrong.

Lage: I see. So he felt there was more political correctness, shall we say--

Riasanovsky: Yes. And I think it's extremely important that we maintain that freedom.

Lage: How is that sense of professionalism fostered among new professors? It sounds like you had for a time almost crowds of young professors coming in. How did that sense of professionalism get fostered among them?

Riasanovsky: They should already have it when they come in. I think the main point is that we invite them for their work, we appreciate their work. I hope they feel as free as I always have. I qualify it a little, I suppose, for if one argued that Japanese-Americans should have been interned in California forever he or she might have run into some kind of trouble, but it never occurred to me to argue that argument.

Lage: [laughter] I see. There may be things beyond the pale--

Riasanovsky: Yes, so that I'm not the best example of freedom because I have no extreme views and certainly no attempt to preach or insist on my point of view. There, I think, we are essentially reflecting the national situation. So we did not create that climate in the United States, but it's very important. As I say, there are very important departures.

Computers and the Study of History

Riasanovsky: One thing that is obviously very important--although as with many important developments it is hard to be precise about--is the use of computers. And I'm not using them, and I suppose if I were starting now, I would.

Lage: Would that make a qualitative difference in your work?

Riasanovsky: Probably not. I think it would make a qualitative difference, let's say, for people who specialize in demography. It made devastating difference for some of my colleagues I know in literature in this sense: establishing texts by the number of adjectives used and correlation with nouns and so on. I know one or two people who spent their lifetime at it, and now it can be done in ten minutes. And that's why I say it's hard to pin down; it depends on what you are doing. But basically it would be a very important development.

Lage: Would it affect, do you think--this is sort of a "what if" question--what you might choose to study? Would there be things that now with these tools--

Riasanovsky: Possibly. In some sense, intellectual history is least subject to it, or at least one of the lesser. But it could be--for instance, I am unhappy, and almost everyone in the field is, that we have no clear social picture of the educated public in Russia in the nineteenth century. And

that's important for me, too--even very important in some ways. Now perhaps with new possibilities, we will get eventually a much more precise picture; of course that would be important.

Lage: What would be done to get that more precise--

Riasanovsky: Ability to define and manipulate large numbers. For instance, how many people have graduated from high schools? How many people have graduated from universities?

Lage: So you would be getting into those records which hopefully exist.

Riasanovsky: Yes, but which presumably would be almost impossible to do without computers. Although of course some of these mathematical methods had been with us for decades. They were not unknown.

Lage: Just harder to use.

Riasanovsky: Yes. One of the things happening now is they have become extremely widespread, instead of being the preserve of demographers or whatever you have.

Another thing that attracts me very much about the new methodology is that presumably you can put very much knowledge in very little space. As you look at this office, and you should see my home--it would be wonderful.

Lage: [laughter] Is this just the tip of the iceberg compared to your home?

Riasanovsky: No, literature is at home and other things. These are books I actually work with.

Lage: And journals.

Riasanovsky: Yes, that's something else, that when you write you pretty much have to do it in one place because you have encyclopedias or whatever. And the place is my office. So computer condensing would be important.

This is skipping to another topic, but perhaps not inappropriately; we are still on the university. I was on a library committee, and there was one library session which I will never forget, on that committee.

Lage: Tell me a date, generally.

Riasanovsky: Several years ago. We had a kind of a very undesirable--to my mind--head librarian at the time. I considered him undesirable because I was on the committee that invited him, and I voted against him. It was a split committee--I think it was a 3-2 division--the chancellor decided in favor of this man partly because he was writing articles and doing, presumably, computer work and so on.

Lage: Even back then.

Riasanovsky: Well, perhaps he was seen as a pioneer, you see, and so on. But he was an undesirable person.

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Riasanovsky: He left us soon after, I think, for some private business in Liechtenstein, for tax reasons.

I remember one statement he made, he said that you should give sabbaticals to library personnel. I said, "That would be fine, but you know, it takes such resources." "Make it competitive; they won't get it, but put it on the books." [laughter] Well, I don't need more examples. He presided over that meeting. We had on the committee a very bright electrical engineer who noted, when members complained, how books simply expand, and we have to work underground or have special storages: "Well, in principle, don't worry. Miniaturization has reached such a level that now we could put all human knowledge in a small black box." [laughter] And I sometimes have nightmares of this small black box.

As you see, it was an interesting meeting. There was also Professor Anderson--there were two Professor Andersons in Classics. This is the British Professor Anderson. I know him only a little; he seems to be a charming gentleman, completely in a world of his own, and he sat there, seemingly lost, which was his main stance. And then the chairman said, "Well, we've covered the ground. Is there any other aspect that we haven't covered?" And suddenly Professor Anderson looked up and said, "Oh, we didn't discuss books as building character." [laughter] So you see, from black box to building character.

California's Advantages over Yale

Riasanovsky: There are enormous advantages to California. Climate is certainly one of them. I love this climate, and I think the best time of the year is the summer, especially as you see, with my window facing north; I think that accounts for at least one more book than I would have written otherwise [laughter].

Lage: Did you ever get lured, or did people attempt to lure you away, after you were ensconced here?

Riasanovsky: Oh, sure. For instance, I was offered an endowed chair, a name chair, at Yale, before I got a chair here. I went to Yale for a week; I was in France at the time, and decided instead to stay here. One reason was that I did feel freer here. Yale also disappointed me in a few ways. I considered Yale very seriously for graduate work; I chose Harvard over Yale, Yale was second. Incidentally, later our daughter went to Yale and liked it, so I'm quite pro-Yale. But in any case, I remembered that graduate and undergraduate courses were completely separate at Yale. Now they're pretty separate here, but they were not then.

Lage: You mean that undergraduates never took graduate courses and vice versa?

Riasanovsky: Did not take them at all. And I thought there was some great thinking behind it, so I asked why. And I was told, "You know, we had to admit women to graduate school, but we do intend to keep them out of the undergraduate." [laughter] So that particular device failed.

I mentioned weather; surely we're ahead of Yale and always will be.

Lage: Sports is better?

Riasanovsky: Yes, although I liked Harvard, Oxford and Yale to have sports which are somehow less professional. But it was a factor.

Some Criticisms of California

Wasteful Overbuilding

Lage: Let's talk a little bit about your service as vice chair and chair of the department and what those roles imply.

Riasanovsky: Yes, if you want, but perhaps I should, however, at this point also say that I at least have some criticisms--because I gave you so many wonderful pluses.

Lage: Of the department here?

Riasanovsky: Department, university, the system.

Lage: Yes, let's get that part in.

Riasanovsky: One thing of course is that it is enormously wasteful. Perhaps my background in China--that's why Tien is an excellent chancellor. I'm sure he feels no crisis, he could put twenty thousand [students] more here [laughter]. It would work.

Lage: Now when you say "wasteful," tell me what you mean.

Riasanovsky: Well, almost everything. Wasteful financially in every way. For instance, we built this big central administration building, and then we had to move to Oakland, and then I guess we have to move from Oakland--

Lage: You mean our system-wide office?

Riasanovsky: Yes. We sort of tend to overbuild and again, it sort of makes little sense now that we have some difficulty with funds, that we cannot obtain an assistant professor in something, and at the same time the building goes on. I know all the arguments; it's all different tracks, people contribute to the marble in the buildings [laughter], but--

Over-optimistic in Planning and Affirmative Action Goals

Riasanovsky: That is one aspect. In general, we tend to be over-optimistic. [Former University President Clark] Kerr was probably a wild optimist, really--all the new campuses and so on--

Lage: Well, some people would call that being visionary. Let's define what you mean by over-optimistic.

Riasanovsky: Well, then we find out we don't have funds for it, or it doesn't work well.

Lage: Did you feel that the new campuses created problems for our flagship campus?

Riasanovsky: I'm in favor of new campuses, of course, I am in favor of education, but to indicate how things were--there is one document which perhaps has been censored since but I saw it as chairman of the Graduate Council. When the San Diego campus--which is a remarkable campus in many ways--became a campus, became prominent, there was of course very high expectations. Then again, there was less money. And I actually read a document from, I think, the chairman of the Graduate Council at San Diego--perhaps not, but surely he was from San Diego--a very angry document to the university president saying, "You promised us that we'll be like a Harvard in the West entirely, but now at best we'll be something like UCLA." [laughter] But that's an example, you see-

Lage: Very high expectations.

Riasanovsky: Yes. But this is the great over-optimism.

Lage: But it is true that of those new campuses, any number of them have turned out to be among the best.

Riasanovsky: Oh sure, they're good. But for example, right now we're spending millions still planning a campus. It's typical. Or to give you another example, Heyman, who was another one of these great optimists--perhaps not quite in the Kerr class--but I remember he was saying something to the effect that he hopes to see the day, he himself, when, with all the ethnic groups we have, we'll have a proportionate number of faculty or even better. I said, "Mike, even better gives you over 100 percent." [laughter] And he said, "It will work out, Nick; don't worry."

Wasteful, over-optimistic. What is so unpleasant about it is that between you and me or whatever that so many outside criticisms are correct.

Lage: In what respect?

Riasanovsky: Well, that we waste money, that we plan wildly.

Lage: Oh, I see.

Riasanovsky: We now even have, as you know, scandals, which is logical, although I'm pretty sure that none will be in the Graduate Council, at least not for the Elberg period [laughter]. We also of course have to react to the trends in the country and even in our part of it, and this is not easy. The bind we are now in on affirmative action is a good example. And again, it takes Heyman and others who think it will work out to keep going.

It is a very difficult problem. I remember a Soviet visitor, when it was still the Soviet Union, who wanted to know about affirmative action. I tried to explain the best I could; finally he said, "I don't understand you, with all these problems. When we needed twenty Kazakhs at Moscow University, we appointed them." [laughter] Well, instead of going through all the committees--we are equal, but still could we please get a black or a woman?

Lage: Did the administration put pressure on the department committees to appoint minorities and women?

Riasanovsky: Sure. University policy was in favor. I don't think they put pressure on saying that you must do this or that; I mean, it doesn't have that kind of power. A lot of stupidity is connected with it; I should say that I think many things done were good things. I was chairman of the Graduate Council when the Ph.D. in Black Studies was accepted, and I suppose I was then a key person in having it accepted. And apparently it worked well; relatively few people get Ph.D.'s. The level is high. And they get excellent jobs.

But very much hype and nonsense went with it. I think perhaps the worst statement made--which became our absolute creed for at least our highest administrators--is that no one loses anything; it's good for all. Nonsense. Of course, everyone loses, and if you have an appointment, if you appoint one person, you don't appoint another. There may be reasons, and there may be arguments for and against, but to present it sort of as it's best for everyone--I can see

people in the state infuriated by it. I think I'm afraid that the anti-affirmative action resolution will pass.¹

Lage: It seems like it will.

Riasanovsky: And partly because of the kind of tone we took. On the department level, for example, we want black historians. We do--as students and as teachers. I would like to go to a black high school, an American black high school and say that history is the best thing for them. Of course I wouldn't because it isn't. They need more, let's say, social workers or lawyers or political figures.

I also do not tell graduate applicants who can't decide between Harvard and Berkeley, "Please come to Berkeley; it's better than Harvard." I don't know that it is. You see, for us it's just another item; for the person in question, he is deciding his life.

Lage: You mean in terms of persuading them into what field or which school?

Riasanovsky: Yes. I'm perfectly willing to talk, and I talk all the time. My usual talks these days are answers to prospective students' questions, such as "How long are you going to stay? Will I be able to work with you?" And I try to answer as best I can. And we do have enormous assets, and I'm glad to talk about it. But I'm not willing to say that this is better than Yale, or why go to Princeton, or--

Lage: Do other professors do that?

Riasanovsky: Yes. Not all. But what I'm saying here is I resent this kind of tone which until perhaps yesterday was quite pervasive, that everyone gains, excellence through diversity--I don't know what that means. I think it has one serious meaning; the serious meaning is this: unless you have diversity or something like that, you can exclude top people for no good reason. In other words, what we really need is absolute nondiscrimination. But the idea that somehow diversity itself will give you a better astronomy department is really quite unworthy of a university.

¹Proposition 209, California state ballot initiative making impossible affirmative action programs for women and minorities in state and local government and educational institutions. Passed in November 1996.

Lage: I was taken with what Bob Brentano said [at the history department session] about, the department's failure to hire women in the early years, and then he made the remark later which expanded that out to include minorities. But what was it that allowed people to think, as he indicated, that women wouldn't come here without their husbands, and not to make more of an effort? Or did no women apply?

Riasanovsky: There's theory and practice, perhaps. In theory, I'm not worried about women at all.

Lage: In this earlier period, though, where for so long it was a totally male department. Except for Adrienne Koch.

Riasanovsky: I don't know why. Because again, you see, these appointments were before my time. I would say that since I've been here, I have not seen any discrimination. And my feeling is that at the moment I don't know whether it's an advantage or disadvantage to be a woman. Because there is, I'm sure, some residual feeling--perhaps inarticulated--in favor of men. On the other hand, many departments would love to have more women.

Lage: But I'm talking about an earlier period, say up to the seventies.

Riasanovsky: That I don't know. I'm trying to say how it is now. Again, the right policy is much easier said than done, and that is, of course, that there be absolutely no discrimination. And I'm sure we have something like 40 percent women graduate students in the department, and it may rise to 45 percent. A crucial issue was, earlier, that very few women applied for graduate work. But again, some of them did not apply because they thought they had much less of a chance. And there was obviously in the country--we were part of it--considerable discrimination.

To me it's very difficult to understand. My mother was a professor and a writer; so was my wife; our daughter should be, next, a professor. And on it goes. But there obviously was. I told you the incident from State University of Iowa, which corresponds to this earlier time here. It was also a very good university and a very good department. In quality, the faculty there was quite exceptional; as I said, mostly excellent people, and you still have this kind of discrimination. So I suppose it was very widespread then. I hope that is behind us now. The crucial issue--as many times pointed out--is still the availability of good candidates in graduate school because that's what you choose from.

Lage: And has that been the problem with getting a more diverse ethnic and racial department?

Riasanovsky: Oh, yes, completely. There are very few, let's say, black historians qualified to teach in our department at this very high level. We had great battles and lost to Harvard, for instance. There are excellent black historians (one of them is our very own Waldo Martin), but very few. You can just see on the market what tremendous fights result. Native Americans as far as I know don't exist as historians. I suppose if a very able one would appear, ten universities would try to get him.

Lage: Yes. What about Asian? Do we have Asian or Asian American professors in the History Department?

Riasanovsky: Yes. Well, a couple of things. First, we do have Asian professors. Professor [Wen-hsing] Yeh is a good example, and she's excellent. We had Professor Tu Wei Ming, but Harvard won him. It seems to me, and I don't want to be unfair, but they are much less interested in history than in so many other programs. For instance, our School of Optometry is mostly Asian.

Lage: So you don't have as many graduate students.

Riasanovsky: We had a comical situation--we had the ASUC [Associated Students of the University of California] president, who was Chinese-American, and he was all for checking on minorities. Except in optometry. They had taken over [laughter]. And very much in engineering. But we have a few [Asian] graduate students now in history, and we'll have more. In the nation, of course, obviously the best field for Chinese-American historians is history of the Far East. There are a number of good Chinese scholars in that. But again, you see, the key problem is percentages in graduate school.

Lage: You worked on graduate admission committees. Was that an area where the university encouraged an affirmative action approach, to get more graduate student minorities?

Riasanovsky: Yes, although always in its own peculiar way. Again, you remember the person who said, "If we need twenty Kazakhs, we appoint them." We don't do such things; instead, we say, "Of course it should be even, but couldn't you please find them?" And sometimes you would say, "Look at the percentage in California: Chicanos are such and such, and there is no Chicano on the faculty." Well, the point again is there are no Chicanos applying for jobs either. And we do not appoint from the mass population.

Lage: But what about Chicanos applying for graduate school, which would develop your pool?

Riasanovsky: Almost none.

Lage: Not many.

Riasanovsky: No, not at all. I think many Chicanos, like some other people, may want a different style of life, and I appreciate it. I should say there are some qualifications. No doubt you should ask others, better informed. There are some special opportunity appointments--

Lage: That are made available to the departments?

Riasanovsky: Yes, and we use some of them. They are often made available not to the department, but to the departments, and then--

Lage: I see. And you kind of compete for them.

Riasanovsky: I think there are some provisions for trying to provide more research grants or whatever for minority students, but basically it is--well, again, in a sense, a utopian belief that it all will work out.

Lage: So this is the area where you think people might have been over-optimistic.

Riasanovsky: Yes. There are also of course obvious differences in the departments. If I said that I don't see why should diversity help astronomy, diversity might help social welfare. First of all, there your clients are mostly minorities, and every professor is from Oxford [chuckle]. But we had a remarkable refusal to face reality time and again.

Berkeley's Size, Not a Disadvantage

Lage: Now we started out this discussion with your overview of some critical--and you mentioned wasteful and over-optimistic. Were there other general criticisms?

Riasanovsky: I don't know. I even like the fact that Berkeley is very big. Many would make that criticism.

Lage: But you think it's an advantage.

Riasanovsky: It has more advantages than disadvantages, and it can be managed. I would say in terms of quality of students that places like Oxford or Harvard--I know those two, and Yale, through our daughter; they probably do not have perhaps as much as the worst third or perhaps fifth of our students. The top students are always extremely good.

Lage: So the top students are comparable.

Riasanovsky: Yes. One reason why the bottom difference happens is because schools in California are very different, from Death Valley to Los Angeles, and being in the top twelve and a half percent in high school may not work out well in Berkeley.

Lage: But they have a chance to prove themselves.

Riasanovsky: Yes, they do. I also, for example, do believe in small courses, but I also believe in large courses and lecture courses, so that doesn't upset me. Sometimes, for instance, Rhodes scholar committees--I have a certain feeling of sorrow when here is a Stanford candidate, and he has letters from four or five--whatever is required--and saying, "I first noticed Bill the second day he was on the campus." Who in the world notices anyone here? [laughter] Second day on the campus! So I'm not saying that smaller places may not have advantages, but overall I'm not against huge universities.

VII BERKELEY IN TURBULENT TIMES, 1960sHolding Together as a Department

Lage: Now where should we go from here? Do you want to talk specifically about your service as chair and vice chair, and any particular occasions, or--

Riasanovsky: Not necessarily. They're in this framework, and, again, with all the problems I've just mentioned and you've heard at the talk, we generally held very well together as a department.

Lage: Right. Now that was certainly brought out. What is your explanation for that? You were chairman at a key point in time, during the People's Park demonstrations and the Third World strike.

Riasanovsky: Yes, I escaped the first year [during the Free Speech Movement demonstrations, 1964-1965] when I was in Paris, and I remember Gene Brucker was in Florence. Gene was writing to me letters, "Shouldn't we return to Berkeley and do something?" And I said, "No, absolutely not." [laughter]

I had a description of what happened, in Paris, from a French scholar who had been in Berkeley and looked at this in wonderful amazement, but did not understand spoken English [laughter].

Lage: Now you came back after FSM, and what did you hear?

Riasanovsky: One thing even now, I feel slightly behind because I didn't know what was Savio's amendment to this or that proposition. [laughter] So, in any sense, you never catch up on such events.

Lage: Well, the faculty senate certainly got very involved.

Riasanovsky: Yes, it did. And as I say, the general trend was that I found that people--or many people, not all of course--who had been on my left were now on my right. In the faculty senate, the reaction was basically very negative against all the disturbances.

Lage: Now I recall at the meeting on Monday we were cautioned not to lump all these events during the sixties together because we had FSM, and then later--

Riasanovsky: Sure, but you see, if you want a precise definition then I'm not your best source. I was also simply a very lucky person. I never had trouble with any students. And I'm not saying that because "I'm so good," it's because I'm so lucky, I guess, because some people did.

Lage: When you say "trouble," what kinds of trouble?

Riasanovsky: People not handing in work, protesting, wanting me to teach more relevant courses, or whatever.

Lage: This didn't come up in your--

Riasanovsky: No, not at all. I think in general our students are probably too respectful of the faculty. But I know that it's not typical, and some good people had trouble. The issue is very, very involved. For instance, I think that students were right in insisting on free speech--

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Lage: So the initial issue of the free speech, even though you weren't here, would be one that you might be sympathetic with.

Riasanovsky: Yes, I was. And the issue of course continued in various forms, so we've had for years this business, "Can you meet at eleven fifteen or only eleven thirty?"

Lage: All the working out of time, place, and manner.

Riasanovsky: Yes.

Lage: Did you get involved in any senate committees that tried to work out those issues?

Riasanovsky: No.

Lage: Then later, we had Vietnam War-related protests, People's Park, the protests against attacks on Cambodia, the tear gas on campus, the Third World Liberation Front. Now you were chairman during part of this time at least. Tell me about it.

Riasanovsky: Well, there's not that much to tell. The department continued its work.

Lage: Do you feel that you or a group of you held together the department?

Riasanovsky: No, I don't make such great claims, but the department did hold together.

Lage: Was it an issue? Did you think it might fall apart?

Riasanovsky: As I mentioned, there were very different issues. For instance, on Vietnam, I was never pro-communist Vietnam. I mean, I knew too much history. At the same time, I had great sympathy for people who did not want to serve in the army. Of course, I've had three years of the army, and one thing that we didn't have to worry about is why are we fighting this war? In Vietnam, it was difficult to answer. At the same time, I could never even begin to look favorably at Vietnam and the Viet Cong, as a desirable system. But as I said, I certainly had sympathy for people who did not want to fight in Indochina.

Many other things are of course of a different nature. The student tone was much too aggressive for what they were trying to do. I suppose there are many things here. One point that occurred often to me--looking at the university and university professors as the highest being and achievement, which of course we are not--that we must be moral guides, etcetera. Well, if you want a moral guide, you should have religion or something other. So it's partly this very high expectation or hope that inspired the movement.

Lage: Expecting more or putting more baggage, sort of, on the professor and the system.

Riasanovsky: Some of it was quite wild. With graduate students, I keep having also the feeling that whatever they do now, they're really on the professor's side.

Lage: They can see their future.

Riasanovsky: Yes. There are many other difficulties involved. For instance--I think I told you this story--We talked about [UC President David] Gardner's departure and behavior, but nevertheless, he was an excellent and perhaps brilliant representative of the university. Of course, he's a direct disciple of Kerr, the greatest figure in that remarkable occupation. I think I mentioned to you that he was talking to the Regent's Club in Southern California with alumni or something else, and as usual he was effective and clear. Then there were questions, and one person said, "I appreciate what you're doing, President Gardner, but how about this tenure? Don't you think we would be better off without it?" And Gardner said, "Well, let's say we are without it. What do we have instead? Would you like labor unions or civil service?" [laughter].

Lage: That was a good answer.

Riasanovsky: A brilliant answer. But what I mean is, for example, unions don't fit the academic world at all. The very idea, you see, that you should work only eight hours a day--I mean, academic life would be pretty much cut by half. So the issues in that sense are complex.

Lage: Now how does this relate to Vietnam? Student strikes?

Riasanovsky: Well, what I am trying to say is that there were all kinds of protests. Unionization was another issue that came up. I don't know whether there should or shouldn't be graduate unions, but it does not particularly fit well in academic life. As I say--perhaps wrongly--I have this feeling that these people themselves will be very soon on the other side, so they better be careful what they arrange. With faculty, it generally doesn't fit, although I'm told that it is successful in some universities, for instance, in the New York system.

Lage: Oh, they're unionized?

Riasanovsky: Yes. It may work. It's interesting what I'm told the results are, that it's less advantageous to the ablest people, most advantageous to the less qualified people because it becomes almost impossible to fire anyone. But in general I'm in favor of unions in industry and many things; I'm not saying it has no assets.

Lage: It couldn't be a great value to the institution if it disadvantages the most able and advantages the least able.

Riasanovsky: Yes. If that analysis is correct.

Lage: Do you recall any meetings or efforts within the department to be unified during this period of student unrest? I mean, you had some of the firebrands in your department; Franz Schurman, for instance, was quite involved.

Riasanovsky: Yes. We had, of course, meetings and very serious meetings, and I think it was assumed that we should hold together, which we did. But I don't remember anyone orating that we should hold together.

Lage: It was just what was done.

Riasanovsky: Yes. Also, people of course maintained their personal preferences. For instance, at the time there were various petitions against the resolutions of the senate, and some people were for, some people were against, and that's how it should be.

Lage: Did questions come up about whether we should hold classes, whether we shouldn't, what to do with professors who didn't hold classes?

Riasanovsky: Yes, the best story on that I can tell you is from the philosophy department. I wasn't there, I'm not a member of the department, but it's an authentic story from an unimpeachable source. At one point the decision was made--it was a serious matter, with so many disruptions on campus--the school year was coming to an end, and the decision of the university was that courses count and everything counts if the equivalent time was spent in classes. In other words, you could have--if you broke down for a week, you would have six class meetings next week, you could have them on campus or off campus. The issue was the equivalent time. And the meeting of the philosophy department broke up on the nature of time [laughter]. Can there be equivalent times? [laughter]

Lage: Is this a true story or urban folklore?

Riasanovsky: Two separate people told me from the philosophy department. One of them is devoid of humor; he told it straight, you see, so I suspect it's true.

Some Berkeley Historians in the Sixties: Carl Schorske, Ken Stampp, Charles Sellers

- Lage: Do you want to say something about specific members of the department during these years? Carl Schorske, for instance, comes to mind.
- Riasanovsky: Carl Schorske is a brilliant man who eventually went to Princeton, as I said.
- Lage: Was there an effort made to keep him here?
- Riasanovsky: Yes, but he had a very good offer. I like Carl Schorske, as I say. The main thing is that he's a very human person. It can be both comical and nice--for instance, he had some neurotic student, and he and [Thomas] Kuhn tried to bring him to his senses. Well, they didn't [laughter], but the point is that he was very seriously concerned.
- Lage: And he did take a role in meeting with alumni, I remember, perhaps after FSM. Going out and smoothing the waters.
- Riasanovsky: Yes, he was always good at meetings. But more seriously, I think of him more as a great historian manqué. He just missed being a great historian is what it means.
- Lage: He missed being a great historian?
- Riasanovsky: That's my impression. Mainly because he could not or did not do enough consistent work. Not at all because of being lazy--and I did not know him so well to check personally how many hours he works. But a kind of a very, very bright mind which did not congeal and concentrate enough. But very few people have a chance of being great historians, so you see it's a compliment.
- Lage: He certainly was a good lecturer.
- Riasanovsky: Oh, yes. A very interesting point he made--I remember, it struck me hard, and I can briefly give you the context. But he found a remarkable description in Freud of conscious, regular, established, intellectual open forces being overwhelmed by the wild, uncontrollable, sweeping, secret, irrational forces. Now, you see, the id, the superego, the ego, there it is. But, it referred to his description of politics in Vienna. And it's a perfectly magnificent example. But somehow I feel it has to be wrong. It has to be wrong because--and here I may be wrong too, of course--but

if you take it as the thing, then psychoanalysis is gone. In other words, it's denying the separate nature--unless it's sort of a coincidence, but what a coincidence!

Lage: The separate nature of the individual?

Riasanovsky: The separate nature of psychoanalysis, psychology, from politics. It's a good example of brilliance, and yet I think ultimately wrong. Again, I could be wrong, but you see, I prefer psychoanalysis coming out of its own intellectual roots, out of of psychological experiments, clinical work. And not being a transfer from Vienna politics. If he could write a big book and structure it all this way, he would be a great historian. But you see, he has more such aperçus than fundamental writing.

Lage: Maybe that's why he was such an interesting lecturer; many intriguing ideas.

Riasanovsky: No, no, he was an excellent lecturer. That's another thing I missed in my life; as I say, I missed the first year of FSM without regrets. But earlier, I had to lecture somewhere--was it in the East, I'm not sure--when Schorske came and gave a lecture here. He was a candidate. And people were just wild for him. Martin Malia felt like climbing the wall. Of course, he got the job. In a sense, he had a tremendous competitor, who as far I know never particularly liked his work--Hans Rosenberg. So we had those two. And those were the days when we appointed both.

Lage: Any other colleagues you would want to mention or talk about that you think were crucial in the department? There were interesting comments about Thomas Kuhn at the meeting on the history of the department.

Riasanovsky: You heard the praise of Ken Stampp at that meeting, and it's very deserved.

Lage: I'm meeting him tomorrow to plan an oral history. Any suggestions?

Riasanovsky: Well, I have only one criticism of Ken Stampp, strongly felt. He refused to be chairman. We wanted him and tried.

Lage: He was vice chairman a number of years, I know.

Riasanovsky: Exactly. It's simply the same way I refused to be dean, only at different levels. By the way, for the record I'm not

absolutely sure I would have been dean at all, but I was asked--

Lage: If you wanted to be considered.

Riasanovsky: Yes. For the graduate deanship, following Elberg. I decided that was too much. If it's chairman, you can argue that if everyone refuses, it's too bad; the department has to carry on. Beyond that there are fewer jobs and more takers. But in any case, generally he was really excellent. I'm glad that he'll give his oral history.

As you could get from [Leon] Litwack's remarks, Stampp was essentially a left-wing intellectual. I think he actually came from a socialist family in Wisconsin, but he was also a very strong defender of the university in those difficult days. I would not include him in the over-optimists and the wild people.

Lage: Now were there some in the department that you would include in this group?

Riasanovsky: Oh, yes. For instance, we lost Charles Sellers. He was a very able historian, and he went with all sorts of things and finally simply gave up scholarship.

Lage: Oh, he did. When you say you lost him, it wasn't to another university, was it?

Riasanovsky: I think he taught for a number of years courses, he could do it in our university, too, let's say, comments on American history or whatever. And he himself was a very important historian. But he really was shaken by it all, and I remember talking to him, and he said, "Nick, tell me honestly: do you think you have anything to offer as a teacher?" I said, "Yes, I can teach a course on Russian history." [laughter] But he came to the conclusion that there is no difference between who teaches and who doesn't teach, and that more or less every statement is a lie.

Lage: So he was really shaken to the core by all of this.

Riasanovsky: He also became very different personally. He was trim and neat at Princeton, where he got his Ph.D., and he became involved with various radical groups and so on. As I say, the stronger reaction was to the right and not into this Sellers' Left. He finally, I think, did write a good book after he retired, in the Oxford series in American history on his period. And I don't know him well enough. We are

friends because as chairman I always tried to support him and his publication, and I was hoping that he would come back. In some sense, he's grateful to me, and we meet in a friendly way, but I haven't kept in close touch with him. He lived on a boat, didn't want a telephone or other bother.

Lage: So he underwent a lifestyle change associated with this--

Riasanovsky: Completely.

Martin Malia: Politics, Productivity, and the Z Article

Riasanovsky: Others--well, for instance Martin Malia, in a sense had a very real change. He became political; he was the most unpolitical person imaginable.

Lage: And was this time period in Berkeley what made him political, do you think?

Riasanovsky: Yes, clearly, we saw it.

Lage: And which direction did he move?

Riasanovsky: Right. And in some sense keeps moving. He is of course very able, very intelligent--but he entirely disregarded, still largely does, his appointments and obligations, except he did teach, and teach well. He is an excellent lecturer. It's dangerous to have typology of people, but one does, and I suppose perhaps because he's Irish: the less he's prepared, the less he sleeps, the more he drinks, the better the lecture [laughter]. But he had been nonpolitical and he became enormously involved.

Lage: And you knew him as a student--

Riasanovsky: Oh, yes, we studied together at Harvard.

Lage: So you should know whether he was political or not. So he didn't approach Soviet history in a political manner.

Riasanovsky: No, well, the interesting point is that he's also our intellectual historian, and deservedly so. In earlier days, people used to admire his teaching, graduate students and very able people indeed, and say, "We never can tell where he really stands. Every view is presented so brilliantly and so

effectively." Now everyone knows where he stands the moment he enters.

Lage: How interesting. So it affected his scholarship, would you say? Or not?

Riasanovsky: Obviously it sure did, but it's difficult to say how. He had enormous difficulty always to finish anything. He wrote a brilliant first book, and there it stayed. And even then, he rewrote it in proof and was for years getting money to pay for the changes. But the book is absolutely first-rate. And so with these political developments he became more productive. Partly because, for example, he obtained representation for the French press--his French is magnificent. Mrs. Jeanmarie Barnes, Tom Barnes' wife, is French, and for years she thought that it was a department joke on her that Martin wasn't French. She didn't believe that he wasn't; it was that good. And his Russian is excellent, too. He is obviously very gifted linguistically. But anyhow, because of his press representation, he would dictate something to Paris from Warsaw, and it would be immediately published. Anyhow, publications appeared fast, and he even--

Lage: Because he was "hot," it this what you're saying?

Riasanovsky: Yes. I don't know exactly why. Once, I said, "Why do you spend time on all this so much?" And he said, "So people like you, Nick, can do academic work." And he wrote this book, *The Soviet Tragedy*, and he said at the beginning, "Well, it's not an academic book, you know. I'm just presenting things." Well, it became a very serious academic book, and I told him so, I said, "Don't apologize. Write." He did write; a whole book, a big book, and now I think it has been translated into ten languages--Turkish is latest. So you see, it had that impact.

Lage: Was it an academic book?

Riasanovsky: Sure. In a sense that it's a very serious book. He knows the history, he knows the subjects, and so on. He had a book earlier which was his lectures from the Collège de France. People there knew him. They got the rights to the lectures, and they published it over his protests. And he gave me a copy and inscribed, "Here is my inadvertent book." But this *Soviet Tragedy* is his advertent book. So you see, it had good results. But the politicization is very far-reaching--

Lage: Even in the book as well as in the lectures.

Riasanovsky: Yes. Therefore some people hate this book; it's also a denunciation of the American academic establishment with sentences like, "Never have so many people been so thoroughly wrong for so long."

Lage: Now is that something you would highly disagree with?

Riasanovsky: Well, it has to be proved, point by point. I do disagree with it. For example, when he says that everyone didn't dare criticize the Soviet Union, I said, "Well, did you read my history?" "Well, Nick, you don't count." [laughter]

Lage: Because he certainly had read your history.

Riasanovsky: Oh, sure. So you see it had a major impact on him. It made him more engaged and more productive and probably less of a scholar.

Lage: Since we're on Martin Malia, do you want to talk about the "Z" incident now?

Riasanovsky: Perhaps I should protest here. I was that year in Washington, and the "Z" article "To the Stalin Mausoleum" came out. Some reporter phoned me and said that it's his job for the Associated Press or whatever that he establish who "Z" was. He is guessing that it's Martin Malia, and do I think it's likely or not? I said, "No, it is not likely. It's not likely for two reasons: one, he never finishes anything. Two, some of it is bad English, and his English is excellent." That evening Martin called me about an appointment in the department, or something. By the way, he became also much more concerned about political views of people who came in and so on--

Lage: In all areas or just in--

Riasanovsky: Oh, yes. Politicization--and I said, "Look, Martin, today I said that you were not "Z", and I see why some people think so. Were you or were you not?" And he said, "I was not." Lying straight. Later he defended that because he was trying to protect his sources. The bad English was the exact quotes in English of some Polish and other people. I always thought he couldn't write that bad English; he didn't.

Lage: So you were right about that.

Riasanovsky: I was right on that point. But I told him, "How can I trust you from now on, if you said anything straight now?" He

said, "You know Besançon?" --his French friend and historian-- "He told me exactly the same thing." [laughter]

Lage: So you weren't the only one. Did that interfere with your relationship?

Riasanovsky: No, no, because we have interests in common and so on, and because I suppose I was not personally a great admirer of him earlier. I thought that he was sort of above board and so on; it wasn't that bad.

Lage: Why did he feel he had to write it under a pseudonym--in order to protect his sources?

Riasanovsky: I don't know. I'm not sure. It happened that he first thought of some other pseudonym, and it's the editor who put "Z", and he agreed. When he retired we had a big party. And I said something like, "I appreciate Martin's work from A to Z."

Lage: [laughter] That must have gotten a pretty good laugh.

Riasanovsky: He's another person who has really changed. I even have a kind of pop psychology theory that until the student movement, he never had anyone really object to him or protest to him. He has a sister, and he would come into my office here and say, "I must write a letter to my sister," and it would be at least twenty days and it would be happening. But he was the only boy in the family, and he was a star from then on. He had an A+ record at Yale; he got a grant to the École Normale in Paris and had the Harvard grant. And somehow, he had an entire life where no one objected to him in any way. And here were these wild students protesting, saying that he's not teaching them the right thing.

Lage: But why did they pick him to protest, and they didn't protest your class?

Riasanovsky: I don't know, but they protested many things. It could have been--no one suffered who was early in the morning. Grossman, I talked about him, is a very hard worker, always gives his lectures at eight. Before nine, nothing happens. But Martin, by contrast, I have a statement from him that I can phone as late as I choose--past midnight, all right, but not before midday. So I think he probably had his courses just when the students came.

Lage: When the students woke up [laughter].

Faculty Recruitment and Retention in the Sixties

[Interview 6: March 13, 1996]##

Lage: This is March 13, 1996, with Professor Riasanovsky, continuing our interview in his office in Dwinelle Hall.

Last time we ended we were talking about the history department. And we more or less ended talking about some of your colleagues, particularly how they reacted to the student unrest.

Just to get back to the sixties for a minute, do you recall any professors who left the department because of student unrest, or difficulties you may have had in recruiting during those years?

Riasanovsky: No. Recruiting was not a problem. As I remember, when I was chairman, no one turned us down. Our strongest appeal by far was to young people because in the California system everyone can be promoted to tenure. We did lose a few people in this tremendous battle for the top people. We lost for instance Thomas Kuhn, the author of the study of scientific revolution--*The Structure of the Scientific Revolution*, I think it's called exactly--to Princeton. I know that because I talked to him about staying [as acting chair of the department, 1963-1964. Kuhn left Berkeley in 1964.]

Lage: Did you talk to him in an effort to keep him here?

Riasanovsky: Yes. Although as I said before, I never overstate the case or insist that we are better because, for one thing, usually the person in question knows very well what the situation is and what he or she is doing. As to being appreciated, by that time even the *Daily Cal* was referring to Kuhn's work.

Lage: [laughter] Well, there you go!

Riasanovsky: Yes. What else do you need? [chuckles] But the point is though that in his case it was a very careful consideration of the two universities with a precise estimate of possible doctoral students of genius quality in the years he has remaining to teach.

Lage: How old a man was he when he left?

Riasanovsky: He was not old at all. So we occasionally lost people, but generally not, you see, because of student troubles.

Lage: Someone remarked at the history department gathering that there was a complacency bordering on pomposity in the department.

Riasanovsky: That was somewhat before my time. There was some pomposity--it's always there. If you have record of that meeting, you will remember that one member of the department sent me a card from Europe saying: "Please let this great mind go." [laughter] I must say immediately for Kuhn that we were always on his side; we felt sorry for him. He sat there and cried, "Princeton wants me to come and Harvard wants me, and California; what am I to do?!" [laughter] But what I am trying to say is I'm afraid some such feeling is common enough among intellectuals--by no means always. I know modest people, I know fine people; my basic guess would be that professors and intellectuals are like other people. I wouldn't know.

Lage: No more pompous than the run of the mill?

Riasanovsky: I suspect not. I don't know. You can be pompous about being the best cab driver, I suppose, or anything else. At the same time, this particular structure--conservative, pompous, blocking things--basically precedes my arrival.

Succession and Promotion

Lage: Another comment that I thought was interesting during that history of history session--although it pertains to a later period--was Paula Fass's comment that your generation of leaders didn't provide for succession, that they kind of took care of the younger people; let them do their work and did the work of the department without bringing the younger people along. At least this is the way I interpreted it.

Riasanovsky: Well, younger members of the department are often dissatisfied today, I'm told. Not only told, but I see some of it! But in my very nice position of professor of graduate studies one thing I do not do is attend any department meetings or appointment meetings and so on. So some of it is second hand, but what they're especially unhappy about, as I said, is that there is too much work, not that they're not brought in to departmental work.

The other point she made, how much social life there was among members of the department, I think is correct.

Lage: And do you think that was important to the way the department functioned?

Riasanovsky: I don't think it was important. It was nice and correct.

Lage: It wasn't important in shaping the department or its work. Or interfering with its work.

Riasanovsky: Either/or [laughter]. But it's true that later you have less of that kind of social life, partly because I guess most wives work. Or, well, Paula Fass is married to Professor [John] Lesch; here we have two members of the department--

Lage: Oh, to a fellow history professor.

Riasanovsky: Yes, and both are enormously busy.

Lage: She also said that the older members let these younger people sit at the associate professor level for a long time.

Riasanovsky: I don't think that long; it may be though in one or two cases. I think generally promotions were generous. Remember that a department recommendation has to be approved by other instances, and that publication is one of the requirements for advancement. There was also considerable flexibility. I remember promotions based on a book still in progress, or on some articles rather than a new book.

VIII SERVICE AS DEPARTMENT CHAIR, 1967-1969, AND ON THE
GRADUATE COUNCIL

Chairman's Role in Recommending Appointments and Promotions

Lage: As department chairman, what were your main responsibilities?

Riasanovsky: The budget, the teaching in the department, research and the functioning of the department in general, appointments and promotions, also leaves and very much else.

Lage: Would you make your own decisions, or rely on the committees?

Riasanovsky: No, of course there are always committees; no one makes lone decisions. But the chairman is also required to have and state his own opinion, and this means reading all the materials, et cetera.

This is probably anachronistic in a sense. When you had small departments it might have been fun to read what a member writes. When you have a great many members--we had sixty or sixty-five--and you have to evaluate work for every step, the burden becomes overwhelming.

Evaluating Academic Quality--Teaching and Writing

Riasanovsky: So you see, not only in promotions to a different level of professorship, but within the level and so on, all has to be recommended by the chairman in his own name and from his own evaluation as well as through the department tenure committee, and you have a department vote, also.

Lage: Then it goes to the budget committee.

Riasanovsky: Yes, after everything is done. The net result--with perhaps some problems--is an enormously serious consideration of the person's academic quality. Academic quality above all, and nine out of ten his or her writing. In this sense people who emphasize teaching are upset, but the main difficulty there is that there is no evaluation of teaching at all comparable to the evaluation of writing.

All sorts of attempts are made to evaluate teaching, especially of course lately. For example, I used to give class evaluations on the last day of class long before it became common. Considering it simply--but it's not that simple--one of the few connections I would have with a large class.

Later, as you know, the university introduced part of this system. We even get notes saying "Please be sure to distribute evaluation forms, because the chairman needs them." So efforts are made, but there are two or three major factors that limit them. First of all, my impression is that the students are extremely kind. Typically when percentages are used everyone is in the upper 10 percent. Arithmetically it doesn't work. Secondly, because there are very different ways of teaching. By the way, visiting classes never developed in our university; sometimes other universities try that.

Lage: You mean the chairman visiting people's classes?

Riasanovsky: Yes, or his vice chairman. And the chairman of course could immediately spend the semester just visiting classes, in addition to already too much work to do. But what I mean is very serious efforts are made. Nevertheless, the result is that the teaching is generally approved. And, again, on evaluating the writing, I think we did a simply splendid job, which was also indicated at our gathering.

Lage: Did you as chairman ever turn down the recommendation that came to you?

Riasanovsky: From committee?

Lage: Yes.

Riasanovsky: There sometimes were committees which split, the minority and majority, in which case it is decided by the tenure committee, and one of the best aspects is that even if you

were in the minority, I can think of one or two cases where the majority was overruled by the tenure committee.

Lage: Was the tenure committee a departmental committee?

Riasanovsky: Yes, that's the committee of all people who have tenure.

Lage: Oh, I see.

Riasanovsky: And I think that's a university regulation. For instance, assistant professors do not have tenure. By the way, we at least have a clear system: not counting visitors, assistant professors do not have tenure, associate and full professors do. There are unfortunately places like Yale where you can be an associate professor and not have tenure.

Lage: So there might be an ad hoc committee that would have assistant professors on it.

Riasanovsky: It might, although it's not likely. It does happen, especially when you don't have another specialist in the field--that someone is especially qualified. And the ad hoc committee of the department reports to the tenure committee, which is the final authority for the department. Then the chairman is to report to the budget committee, adding his own opinions which are to be based on his own knowledge, not only saying what his colleagues tell him. Then the budget committee appoints an ad hoc committee.

Lage: Amazing.

Riasanovsky: Yes, which in turn reports to the budget committee.

Lage: Now did you ever get turned down by the budget committee on somebody the department recommended?

Riasanovsky: We've had until very recently a fantastic record. We had an extremely good record; we were not turned down. Recently we were. I don't know the circumstances, but I do not participate in discussions, which is very much my choice. I'm told indirectly that the reason was that the man was a Near Eastern scholar and a specialist in Turkey and Turkish subjects and reportedly didn't know enough Arabic.

Notice also the system is this, that people who are on the university ad hoc committees--the rule is that there ought to be people from the department, but they are to be in the minority. So a typical committee of five would have one or two from the department, three from elsewhere. But also

each one is to vote his own opinion, not defending the department's stand or anything of that sort.

Lage: Might he be a person who was on the ad hoc committee or the tenure committee in the department?

Riasanovsky: Yes.

A Less Bureaucratic Appointment System at Harvard

Riasanovsky: I might tell you the story at Harvard, one of our main rivals, of course, but this was before I was at Cal; I was then actually a student at Harvard. There was a famous professor, Chizhevsky--a Russian, or more exactly a Ukrainian. That actually has a point because his name is spelled five or six different ways in all the bibliographies. For instance, he taught in Germany; the "T" would be put first.

Anyhow, Harvard wanted him; he was a very outstanding scholar, although he had some quirks: he knew many languages, and he could read English but he didn't want to learn to speak it, however. If you teach at an American university, that's a problem perhaps. But anyhow, there was Dmitrii Chizhevsky, and Harvard invited him, and Karpovich, my teacher, was an interpreter with President James Bryant Conant of Harvard. Conant was saying at some point in their discussion that of course your salary is \$10,000--which in '46 and '47 was much money--and, "Please, Professor Chizhevsky, do understand that we also do many other things. You have medical insurance, you have accident insurance, you have social security contributions." Whereupon Chizhevsky switched to English, and said, "Don't believe in those things. Give cash!" And Conant said, "All right," and they hired him [laughter]. No one could do it in the California system; it would go through ten levels, there would be ideological discussions: "Is it fair or unfair?" [laughter] So you see where Harvard had an advantage.

Lage: Yes. So they hired someone who couldn't speak English.

Riasanovsky: Well, yes. Later, the meetings of the department, led by an even greater figure, Roman Jakobson, were in Russian. And one visiting scholar who was a specialist in some particular area such as prehistoric scripts in the area or something,

complained to Conant, "It's all in Russian; I cannot understand what is going on in the department." [laughter]

So you see we have a very heavily bureaucratic system. The main difference is that Harvard really worries seriously about only appointments to tenure or promotions to tenure. Another thing is that apparently the dean decides salaries. In our case it's all linked to steps and on it goes. The most difficult thing is chairman's position.

Department Chair, a Thankless Task

Lage: Does this make the chairman kind of a target for people's emotions?

Riasanovsky: Yes.

Lage: Was that a problem for you?

Riasanovsky: I told you how during this time a colleague of mine came and said, "So you don't believe in standards of morality." This was too good to be true, so I said, "Well, of course not." What happened was that he wanted me to institute a dress code because he was lecturing, and there was a woman who was barefoot, sticking her feet, he said, in his face [laughter]. Later he wrote to me one of the best letters of apologies that I ever got. Sort of how tensions and so on make people act differently, and he never wanted to make any criticism of my handling of the situation and so on.

But tensions exist. Zelnik, as chairman, feels that at present.

Lage: I would think more now than ever.

Riasanovsky: And very often it's a totally thankless job. But I told you my reaction in the theater, didn't I?

Lage: No. Tell me.

Riasanovsky: The play, Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* was in San Francisco. There are almost inhuman arguments between husband and wife, which is the main subject of the play. At one moment, the wife, trying to be as vicious as she could, says, "You couldn't even make chairman." I sat in the fourth row, and I burst out laughing. [laughter] And people

people turned, looking at me. I'm generally very well behaved in public places, but that was too much.

Chancellors Seaborg, Bowker, and Heyns

Lage: In your chairmanships and vice chairmanships, from those periods do you have any comments about the administration, the chancellors, the dean of L&S [College of Letters and Science].

Riasanovsky: They treated the History Department very well. It's worse now because there are less funds. We were, I'm sure, one of the favored departments. I once was asked to become chairman of the Slavic Languages and Literatures department as an emergency measure; that department was not doing well. I of course turned it down; I think it's enough obligation to be your own department's chairman. I also first of all asked what the department would feel about that, and they said, "The department wants you." I still turned it down. To my mind it would be unthinkable that someone would be put in charge of a department from another department, because they were not doing well.

So all this is very worth mentioning to underline that we had few problems, but there are of course issues. I remember a long afternoon with [Glenn] Seaborg, who was then chancellor, and he asked me the question, "Why does it take so long for a historian to write, and they do not have, usually, articles?" Well, we had a discussion; Seaborg is an intelligent person. But the point is that Seaborg was in chemistry. Every experiment becomes published. So you have reams of material, and here we have someone who says he is writing a great book for six years. So I tried hard to explain the difference, and he listened politely. I'm not sure what the end result was [laughter]. But I would say that we received excellent cooperation for the department.

Lage: Did you notice differences between the various chancellors? You mentioned Seaborg, and he was followed by [Chancellor Edward] Strong. You were acting chair under Strong. And then [Roger] Heyns. Did any changes occur with the different chancellorships?

Riasanovsky: I would say Strong and Heyns were not on the same intellectual level with Seaborg. At that time I was also chairman of the Graduate Council (1970-1973), I think. But

anyhow, we gathered every week and the campus wasn't exactly burning; we never got to that point completely, but perhaps close. And Heyns would begin by saying, "I wish we would discuss more philosophy of education." [laughter]

There is also a story--it may be wrong--but they had great difficulty with one of the chancellors because the chancellors usually are also members of the departments. Needless to say that Seaborg was a member of the chemistry department. But our departments sometimes turned down our chancellors [laughter]. They had to be in some department, and I have forgotten whether it was Strong's or Heyns' department that voted against him.

Lage: Oh, but Strong was a philosophy professor here for a long time before he was chancellor, so maybe it was Heyns, who came from Michigan.

Riasanovsky: Yes, psychology didn't want him.

Lage: That must have been very embarrassing.

Riasanovsky: Yes, it was. I don't know if they finally put him in education, or what.

The chancellors have their own styles. [Albert] Bowker's style--when I was chairman of the Graduate Council--Bowker was statistician. He was perhaps a cynical or at least should we say a realistic person. He said that one difficulty with the faculty here is this business of promotions and higher salaries. He had been head of the entire New York system, where college salaries were tied to those of school teachers and determined automatically, and he said, "And there, people always got more than they deserved." [laughter]

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Riasanovsky: Bowker's most remarkable achievement that I know of--not the most important perhaps--but he, being a statistician--again, a very good one, because he was immediately accepted by our statistics department, one of the best--was to plan the budget including deaths during the coming year. We had large enough numbers that it worked.

Lage: So he actually predicted the number of deaths?

Riasanovsky: Yes, successfully. Perhaps resignations were also included, but deaths was the crucial issue. As he said once, "Here is,

let's say, eleven deaths this coming year. I have not yet assigned them to the departments." [laughter]

Lage: He has quite a sense of humor. Very dry.

Riasanovsky: So as chairman, I could be told that you have two promotions and one death [laughter]. So that's some of my comments on chancellors.

Lage: Do you have any more to say about Heyns? Did you think he handled the situations on campus well?

Riasanovsky: No, not at all. It was sort of overrun by events. He meant well, and he had a good record, but he simply was not in league with what was happening. Bouwsma became vice chancellor, and Bouwsma was in league.

Lage: Oh, Bouwsma was vice chancellor under Heyns?

Riasanovsky: Yes, although Bouwsma later was invited, I think, to be chancellor or some such position at Indiana, and he said, "I see absolutely no reason; I tried an administrative appointment once, and I failed completely." [laughter]

One thing I did do--that was also at the time of the black movement. Heyns used to address the faculty and give the following oration, which I think--I never checked--it may be a major scholarly project. It was based on Saint John Chrysostom's famous Easter sermon. It was Saint John Chrysostom who said "And those who came to Christ in the first hour, and those who came in the second hour, and the third, and the fourth, and the fifth." And that is the style Heyns assumed, counting hours, without Christ. And we were already in the eleventh hour, and things were going badly.

At the same time, two absolutely top people in our department started a course in Black Studies. The two absolutely top people were [Winthrop] Jordan--who went south eventually--the book that proves the point is *White Over Black* (1968)--and Larry Levine, who was the author--much later--of *Black Culture and Black Consciousness* (1977). And by the way, read it, if simply for interest. It's a fascinating book on black humor and so on.

Perhaps it wasn't so clear at that time, although even then it was clear enough, but essentially the history department had the two best people teaching this course. But this was an undergraduate course, and therefore you couldn't really have teaching assistants. So they got a two hundred,

three hundred person class, with readers--that could be done--but not teaching assistants who could hold sections. So I requested to make an exception. I was sent back to the rules of the university. Then I wrote to Heyns and said, "Please, immediately provide this, or take back what you said to the senate." I got the exception immediately. Because there he was saying, "It's so desperate, it's so important." But they couldn't provide a couple of teaching assistants?

Lage: That's an interesting tale of how things worked--

Riasanovsky: Yes, well, I very rarely behave like that, but it worked.

Lage: So this must have been somewhere in '67 to '69, when you were chair.

Riasanovsky: Yes.

Lage: Was the L&S dean an important figure for the department?

Riasanovsky: Yes, we had little problem with the L&S dean because, again, it was part of our supportive administration.

Lage: Okay. Anything else about being chairman of the history department?

Riasanovsky: What else am I to say about the history department? I do identify very strongly with it. I've turned down all kinds of appointments which were not in the department but tried to do what I could--

Lage: That were on campus?

Riasanovsky: Yes, I mentioned that I wouldn't be faculty representative to the athletic department. I didn't want to be considered for being graduate dean and so on. But with the history department, I have very strong and on the whole very happy associations.

Graduate Dean Sandy Elberg

Riasanovsky: Now the Graduate Council. The Graduate Council I found very useful, and I liked serving on it; that's why I served--I suppose as much as anyone else at all [1965-1973, chair 1970-1973]. And I was on the Graduate Council for the nine

campuses, including ours [Coordinating Committee on Graduate Affairs, 1982-1984 and 1986-1989 (chair, 1983-1984)].

Lage: And was Sandy Elberg dean the entire time?

Riasanovsky: Much of the time, yes [1961-1978]. And that is what made it so good. Elberg was a wonderful person. I think his main asset was his extremely high intellectual level, about which we've been talking so often. Of course I don't know his field; his field is biochemistry, and he is a well-known person in that field. He developed a vaccine for yaks in Mongolia. He had an office in Switzerland for the WHO [World Health Organization] So he was a completely top-level intellectual in academic qualities. At the same time, he was a remarkably humane and flexible person. He was interested in every graduate student, or at least every graduate student he met--we had too many so he couldn't be interested in all of them. And he used extremely skillfully whatever resources he had. Some of it might have been on the verge of legal, but it helped students. He had an endowment for lectures on God, which he extended to include atheism, so we could invite anyone more or less in philosophy or related disciplines. Probably whoever donated it long ago wanted to support God, and here we are inviting people who are against.

Lage: [laughter] But nobody called him on it.

Riasanovsky: No, but I think that's intellectually justified. But that's an example of flexibility. Right now I think one of our graduate students needed an extension for a doctoral dissertation--only a few days--but the difference is that if she didn't get it, she would have to pay tuition for another semester. Because you have to be registered each semester. And I was sure that if Elberg were there, there would be no question. We made it anyhow, but it's in instances like that that he was simply excellent.

The Work of the Graduate Council

Lage: Now he said--I told you I did an oral history with him--he said the graduate dean had no real authority.

Riasanovsky: That's correct in one sense. As you saw when we discussed the department, all appointments are by the department. All promotions are by the department. In other words, crucial faculty decisions bypass the graduate dean. Where the

graduate dean is important, although never alone, with the Graduate Council--the main point of the Graduate Council is to accept courses.

Lage: Accept graduate courses?

Riasanovsky: Yes. And degrees, to establish a new degree. To inspect graduate work in the departments. Each course had to go through, and I learned a lot about it. For instance, an MBA [Master in Business Administration] degree was recommended for a southern campus. You appoint again an appropriate committee out of the Graduate Council, but you can also ask whatever other expert help you have. And the expert help divided. One opinion was that there was nothing better than an MBA to attract people to be good in business and so on. The other opinion was that the MBA is just about bypassed; the future structure will be computer wizards and a few such on top and lackeys at the bottom. [laughter] There's no room for MBAs.

Lage: How shall I put this: did the academic programs look down on the professional schools?

Riasanovsky: I would say again, not our professional schools. Because many of our lawyers could be professors of other things. Many of our doctors could be professors of physiology and so on. You notice that recently the San Francisco campus won two, I think, Nobel Prizes. So I don't think there is much looking down, but again I'm sure there would be if people were not of very high quality.

But you see, the Graduate Council must accept a course. Usually almost all courses got accepted, but not all, and not immediately. One typical question which was difficult would be, "Do you have the resources to mount that program? You want to have a separate department of public health. Who would be teaching it and how many people and what are their qualifications and so on?" That was the main work of the Graduate Council.

Lage: Now one thing Sandy Elberg told me about--I wonder if you have any knowledge of it--was his being told by his colleagues, other deans, that he ought to really appear at a meeting, because they had received an agenda for the meeting and on it was a proposal to do away with the graduate division. He hadn't been even notified of the meeting. So he went; it was Mark Christensen who had called the meeting, under Chancellor Bowker. And then this subject was never

brought up because there he was. And he never understood what the dynamics were.

Riasanovsky: No, I don't think there is any understanding of that, except that I learned as chairman of the Graduate Council--not to speak of higher spheres, I suppose--that at least nine out of ten strange moves are inadvertent errors of omission. Then, you see--there arise great discussions--"What is the plot? What is the meaning of it?"

Lage: There wasn't any scuttlebutt that you might have been aware of.

Riasanovsky: No. I also think that if there really was such a proposal seriously made, it's probably a matter of renaming or restructuring. It certainly could not mean no organization for the graduate world. That would be against the principles of California. [laughter] You would institute another division.

Lage: Right, not do away with one. Another thing that Sandy Elberg brought up, he wanted me to ask you about your role in the trial by the council of an unbalanced woman who was appealing for not being admitted to the graduate division.

Riasanovsky: Oh, I don't know.

Lage: Do you recall that?

Riasanovsky: I recall the case.

Lage: He thought you were brilliant.

Riasanovsky: Well, thank you. The one who was brilliant was the person who recently died: Francis Whitfield of the Slavic Department. He died something like a week ago. He's an interesting man. First of all, I think he was paralyzed two or three years in a Catholic hospital and learned all the languages that people there spoke, especially the Catholic friars. He spent the rest of his life mainly writing an English-Polish dictionary. In his spare time, he solved crossword puzzles. Sad to say, I think he was a poor department chairman, partly because he never asked for much. You see, the dean would say, "It's a difficult year; let's not ask," and he would be the only one who wouldn't [laughter].

Lage: That's not the way the system works.

Riasanovsky: No. But he wrote a brief against that woman which was absolutely magnificent. And I thought that, fine as he was as a linguist, he probably should have been a lawyer. There was such precision and bitterness and excellence.

Lage: Had she applied for the Slavic Department?

Riasanovsky: She had nothing to do with Slavic, but simply she questioned the graduate decision--I think she failed the doctoral qualifying examination of whatever department it was. We discussed it, and I made some chance comments which Elberg liked very much, but I don't remember my comments, so obviously they were not for history. But I remember Whitfield's inimitable performance; it was quite notable.

But I appreciate Elberg's nice remark. We always got along well. We sometimes disagreed; one time I blew up at Sandy Elberg. We were having lunch at the faculty club, and he said, "Where do these people come from?" And I said, "What do you mean?" Well, what happened was that some faculty members who were brought in by affirmative action failed to make tenure and had to be let go. And he said, "Who brought them?" And I said, "Sandy, you brought them." [laughter] That's the basic policy of our administration, with this optimistic view, to quote Heyman, "It will work out." And it doesn't. So you see, I was not always in agreement, but he was and is a remarkable man.

Divisions in the Department of Political Science

Lage: I want to talk about your statewide service, but should we talk about review of departments or anything else that you recall about the Graduate Council?

Riasanovsky: Yes, that's something else, they did review the graduate programs of departments. The two reviews I recall when I was chairman--one of them was the Romance Languages Department, the other was Political Science Department [1975-1976]. I learned a lot both ways.

Lage: I think we talked about Romance Languages.

Riasanovsky: Yes. Political Science--the Graduate Council had a very able electrical engineer computer person who told us, "Why are they called science, and shouldn't that be eliminated?" And I said, "Well, what do you mean?" He said, "Let's check.

Let's read their dissertations." You know it's one of the largest departments, and I thought, There we go. And he said, "Two percent will be enough." Statistically valid. So he proposed it. Well, we did not read the two percent--and I told him that since Aristotle established political science--384-322 B.C.--it's too late to abolish it; we have to take it [laughter]."

Finally, I think even he signed our report with some criticism, but it's interesting--for instance, I discovered that political science was much more divided than we are.

Lage: That's what I was going to ask you. I've always heard it's been a very divided department.

Riasanovsky: Yes, very bad.

Lage: And is it divided on theoretical issues or personal differences?

Riasanovsky: On theoretical issues, but yes, of a major kind, namely the differences between, say, [Nelson] Polsby and other people who use computers to calculate elections, etcetera, and the freewheeling theoreticians--theory of politics, theory of law.

I remember talking to a member of the first group and trying to defend a member of the second group saying, "Look, he has several books," to which the man said, "Nick, do you really call that books?" [laughter] You see that fortunately in our field that does not exist. Again, I think that one reason for the strength of the history department--well, perhaps it should be put as one reason with two elements. One is that there is a much more unitary line to history than, let us say, to political science.

Second, our department happens to be very tolerant--not that we necessarily agree, but as I say, the remark I just mentioned wouldn't happen. In another department there's no such agreement, even if Aristotle established the field. A revealing point made at a doctoral qualifying examination was to ask the candidate to name ten people in the history of mankind who contributed the most to political science. Well, the student would start, let's say, with Aristotle and end with Freud. And the next question: Why was not a single one of them a political scientist? It's of course true; even Aristotle was primarily a philosopher. So in some sense it doesn't have the same kind of hallowed and unitary field that we do. And that's probably as important or more important

than anything else, though of course people could also divide and did divide politically and in every other way.

Lage: Or maybe people interested in politics tend to be more adversarial.

Riasanovsky: And what you say about a pompous quality also exists. One member of that department--I won't mention the name--was invited to give a paid, special lecture one year. He was furious that he was not invited the second year. With all the campus to select from, don't they see that he is the best?

The Statewide Coordinating Committee on Graduate Affairs

Lage: Amazing. Let's turn now to look at some of the statewide Graduate Council business.

Riasanovsky: There I had less to do--

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Lage: You were saying the most important was the Coordinating Committee on Graduate Affairs, which you served on for most of the 1980s.

Riasanovsky: There you met as a group; the main thing was the approval of programs, and on the whole, things went well. The higher up you go, the more you depend on specialists. In my own department, I had a pretty good idea about evaluating most professors; in some program in Davis in physiology, obviously I had to rely on others.

Lage: Did the coordinating committee approve any major-new program? Or a new major? Or a new department?

Riasanovsky: An undergraduate major, not necessarily. Any new program and any new degree at the graduate level. The basic processes were very good, very expert, and as far as I can tell, at least 90 or 95 percent based on the nature of the case rather than any personal or other preferences.

Lage: You didn't observe rivalries between campuses?

Riasanovsky: That may be the remaining 5 percent. The coordinating committee is very much a part of the university and a good

part--again, however, it adds to bureaucracy. Of course, it means a longer time--for instance, we mentioned Chizhevsky at Harvard; no Graduate Council or Graduate Council of all the Ivy League schools had to approve his hiring.

Lage: Did you consider issues of balance? We don't need this program at UCLA because we've got one at Irvine, for instance.

Riasanovsky: Yes. The issue of balance had to be considered with every program because the program had to justify itself. For instance, a proposal for a very good field which seemed to have no faculty and no students would obviously be turned down.

Lage: You were chair of the coordinating committee from '83 to '84, and that wasn't a great year for the university budget--you were coming off the Jerry Brown era and less money for the university. How might that have affected your decisions?

Riasanovsky: There are also budget committees in one way or another, but that was a factor. The main point was, first, I suppose, whether the program is intellectually sound. Who will be the faculty, how many--you could perhaps sustain that your plan to have two men or women by next fall, but you couldn't say you'll appoint four if you didn't have the openings. And second, even if it would be an excellent program, what is your argument that there will be students, there will be a demand for it?

Lage: Do you recall anything that was particularly controversial during your service?

Riasanovsky: Many things. Well, things are controversial. As I said, very few programs were turned straight down. Very few. But often people were asked to rework their plans, to return next year, to talk when you have made the appointments, and so on.

Lage: So they kept a careful check on things.

Riasanovsky: I kept reading the materials, but I must say that I felt less useful in the sense that so much of it was really in different fields and on different campuses. Of course I had letters explaining it and presentations. People could be and were invited to present their cases, especially if there was some controversy or people didn't understand if it will be really medical psychology or psychological psychology and what school it should be in and so on. But it's the one

thing that makes the university so good, although it's also cumbersome and difficult at times.

As in the case of the Graduate Council at Berkeley, it is not the effective power in the sense that it does not have FTEs, and it does not have the power of promotion or demotion or elimination. And that's the main complaint of Elberg and other people who are so devoted to the Graduate Council. But it is part of this extremely thorough examination, and again I repeat, overwhelmingly intellectual, structural examination. Although teaching is always considered important, it's not just lip service, but unless there's serious deficiency, teaching always is at least acceptable and we return to creative work.

Lage: It sounds like it works.

Riasanovsky: Yes. It's a very good system indeed.

Lage: When you were chair of the Graduate Coordinating Committee, did you go to regents' meetings?

Riasanovsky: No. I never went.

Lage: You didn't have to go to regents' meetings.

Riasanovsky: I didn't have to go, no; I could have gone, I think, but there would have been no particular point in it. I suppose I would have to go to a regents' meeting if there were very serious questions from the regents--Why this program?--and so on.

The Mabelle McLeod Lewis Memorial Fund

Lage: Now here is something you brought up last time, and then we turned on the recorder, and we didn't record about it. The Mabelle McLeod Lewis Memorial Fund.

Riasanovsky: You have a good memory; I have this to bring up today. I remember you asked. It's a very good thing. It's foundation money for graduate students, for graduate work in northern California.

Lage: And not just UC?

Riasanovsky: No. The two institutions to profit without any doubt are Stanford and California. I suppose if you give twenty grants--by the way, the number of grants varied because it depended on the money and not on the number, so if some needed more there was less for others. But twenty is not a bad guess, eighteen, fifteen, five alternates or whatever. I would say that all but two or three would be from Stanford and California, evenly divided. And then maybe one from Davis, one from the University of San Francisco, one from Santa Cruz. It's a great help to graduate students.

Lage: And you were one of the members who helped award the grants?

Riasanovsky: Yes, for many years. Again, it was a good group. Elberg also was a member. Later, [Graduate] Dean [William] Shack. It's in humanities, social sciences, but not in mathematics or "hard" sciences.

Lage: And did they have representatives from Davis and--

Riasanovsky: No, it was mostly run by Stanford and Cal people. There were only several. The aim--and there is some difficulty there--is to finish a doctoral dissertation. And even I think it says to finish in the year of the fellowship. This often doesn't work out. Let's say perhaps 50 percent do finish and others don't. And we even more or less assume that if the dissertation is going well, if the candidate is well advanced, he or she belongs.

I liked it for several reasons. One is that you dealt with a group of very able applicants indeed. And another is that it's interesting because you see all the different fields; they represent different fields in the social sciences, humanities, languages. It was a kind of a check-off or information about what is now popular in the intellectual world. I even sometimes checked what names occurred most often, whether it's Roman Jakobson, whether it's Lacan or Said.

Again, it was done very well. The members of the committee happened to be very good members. It also gave me a good knowledge of Stanford. And not necessarily happy in this sense: that their graduate students always are provided for.

Lage: So this fellowship program seems superfluous for them.

Riasanovsky: Well, they bargain, or they say, "Why don't you give me more?" The level of support and the expectation of support

are way ahead of our students. So the achievements and grants, I would say, are very close to fifty-fifty. Perhaps fifty-five to forty-five for California, but I'm not really sure of that.

The application form has been changed recently--I finally retired simply because it took so much time. I recommended Irv [Irwin] Scheiner, and he was appointed, so we have a history professor. Irv Scheiner, among his achievements and qualities, may be the best read man in the department. It's difficult to say, but he is a real insomniac, and he reads through the night [laughter].

Lage: Gives him extra time.

Riasanovsky: Yes. I think it's unfair competition. But his reading and knowledge is fantastic, and of course we will very much want a person like that here.

Lage: So would you read the beginnings of the dissertations that you were--

Riasanovsky: Yes. I think in that case they didn't say send in every page, but they were asked to send chapters. Some of them are strong memories--there was a very interesting chapter on Oakies and their adjustment to California by one of our students who became a professor here but then unfortunately went to the University of Washington in Seattle because his wife got an academic job there, too.

Lage: Jim Gregory, I'll bet.

Riasanovsky: Yes, exactly.

Lage: So he was one of the people you granted--

Riasanovsky: Yes. And I remember it was a fascinating study; Gregory received the grant very easily. This again shows that quality was usually correctly gauged.

Bancroft Collections on Siberia and the California School of Russian History

Lage: And we don't have a western historian on the faculty now.

Riasanovsky: That's the worst thing, because our one great research library is the Bancroft. Archives and library, not just books. We actually have people now who make excellent use of it. An example is [Yuri] Slezkine, whose dissertation was written of course before he came here; it was on northern tribes in Siberia.

Lage: And there are things in the Bancroft on the northern tribes?

Riasanovsky: Oh, yes. And on Alaska, all the Indians and so on. We have people from all over the world who come to use it. That, by the way, I suspect was also perhaps a less desirable aspect of the great successful revolution because I guess of the top people in Russian history that they wanted to select from, the result was Malia and I; no one was concerned with Siberia and the collections in the Bancroft. And I say it with great regret.

Lage: But maybe students will be, or have been.

Riasanovsky: Well, it's developing. My research assistant, Ilya Vinkovetsky, who comes from a prominent Russian intellectual family--his father was both a scientist and a dissenter who became famous with an article on how you behave when you are being interrogated by the KGB [Komitet Gosudarstvennoi Bezopasnosti]. He came here about the age of ten or twelve with his family. So he's completely Russian educated as well as completely American educated. He wants to teach both Russian and American history and is writing on the relationship of church and natives in Alaska and the adjoining part of Siberia.

Lage: How interesting.

Riasanovsky: By the way, the two were sort of connected even in the worst of the Cold War, when it was discovered through the use of these implanted radio things, that the bears went from Russia to the United States and back [laughter]. On ice. Sort of roamed freely.

Lage: So much for the Cold War.

Riasanovsky: Yes. They didn't recognize it.

But the point is that Kerner and his students did very important work on Siberia and so on, and even people spoke--for instance in the Soviet journal *Voprosy Istorii* in the 1940s--of the California historical school--meaning not Martin or me, but Kerner, [Raymond] Fisher, Lantzeff--Fisher

has a well-known book on the fur trade, later on Bering; Lantzeff has an excellent book on the administration of Siberia in the seventeenth century. That was the California School--of course, the Soviet journal had also to criticize it because it wasn't Marxist and so on, but it received recognition.

Lage: Well, we're uncovering a lot here. I think maybe this is a good stopping point.

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IX SOVIET HISTORIOGRAPHY: HALF EMPTY, HALF FULL**[Interview 7: March 20, 1996]##****Some Thoughts on Being Fortunate in Family, Time, and Place**

Lage: Today is March 20, 1996. This is session seven with Professor Riasanovsky. We planned to talk today about studying and teaching and writing Russian history. How would you like to begin?

Riasanovsky: What I would like to say first is simply to finish with a more general discussion. It's a special topic. And simply say that I also of course have been very fortunate in my marriage--in fact, now we have a daughter who is writing a doctoral dissertation, so we discuss lectures with her.

Lage: That must please you to have another historian in the family.

Riasanovsky: Yes. My mother, my wife, our daughter are all professors. Well, our daughter is provisionally. She has to finish her doctoral dissertation. But it's a very fortunate event indeed. There are of course many exceptions, but unfortunately in our so-called democratic society--it is democratic in some ways--unless one has certain such advantages, it's very difficult to become a professor.

Lage: Advantages such as the kind of family background?

Riasanovsky: The family, right. Simply being able to read and write and discuss intellectual topics. I remember I realized earlier at the State University of Iowa--the first American university where I taught--that somehow I recognized the names of people who won fellowships, scholarships, and so on. Very many of them were faculty children. Again, as far as I can see, it was completely above board. For one thing you

could go to the State University of Iowa if you graduated from high school; you didn't have to fight for a position, but it's really amazing how much advantage the family gives.

And beyond that, my wife of course always read my work, always helped me. I recognized that in print both in general and on specific topics in some cases, for instance in my latest book on the origin of romanticism. She did her graduate work at Columbia. This was always very fortunate.

I want also to repeat another fortunate factor--I think I already mentioned it: perhaps because of the nature of history, perhaps because of our department and the character of the people involved. As I said, the battle of the titans took place before I came. We never had these tremendous divisions that other departments often have. Psychology has to be divided into three parts; in political science people who, as the phrase goes, do theory, despise people who count votes and vice versa.

Lage: And you haven't had a division of people who do social history objecting to political history, or anything like that?

Riasanovsky: I wouldn't say there's absolutely no division, but it's more a continuum. Another way to put it, I would say that if you asked our history department or all the history departments in the country or representatives of them or whatever, to name the best historians today or in the last twenty years or whatever, there would be considerable agreement on the list. This would be impossible in political science, philosophy, psychology, sociology, etcetera.

So you see, there are a great many advantages, and I don't want to sound pessimistic, but in some ways things look worse now than before. But perhaps they'll get better; but I feel I have been through my career as a professor at just about the best time possible. As we already mentioned, for example, in history a thinning down and having fewer replacements is more damaging than elsewhere, because one of the most fundamental measures of a good history department is how much do you cover.

Lage: You mentioned Byzantine history. Are there other areas that are lacking?

Riasanovsky: Oh, sure. Right now perhaps the major lack is in Western [U.S.] history, where we have perhaps the world's best library and archives at Bancroft. We are doing something

about it; I think there will be a new historian next year. But there are many areas which could be improved, and of course if you lose people, let's say, like Bill Bouwsma and Gene Brucker, and replace them with beginning assistant professors, it's not quite the same although I know there are arguments in favor of younger replacements other than the budget arguments.

Soviet Historical Writings, Pervaded by Ideology

Riasanovsky: Now about Soviet historiography. I've written and spoken on the subject, and I will simply summarize some of the most obvious things from my point of view. It is a conundrum, especially if you don't know the field--if you know the field it's still a conundrum, but somehow you understand it better, and you sort of can operate in it better--

Lage: You mean the whole field is a conundrum?

Riasanovsky: Soviet historiography, yes. The conundrum is this: in one sense, it's a disaster, or was a disaster because now it's over. It's wonderful to speak of it in the past. On another level, much good work was done. And most particularly in Russian history, although to some extent this comment refers to all history and indeed to the entire Soviet academic and cultural performance.

Lage: So now are you referring to historians from the Soviet Union?

Riasanovsky: Yes. That's what I'm referring to. A good friend of mine, a wonderful historian, Henry May, went for the first time to an American--Soviet conference on the eighteenth century. And he was horrified. By the way, he was not at all pro-Soviet; he certainly is not stupid, he simply never came face to face with it.

Lage: In his field, maybe he just didn't have to--American intellectual history.

Riasanovsky: Well, yes, right, and you know, there is enormous difference --I know from my own trips to the Soviet Union--between knowing it and getting into it.

Lage: What did he experience? Was the conference about eighteenth century--

Riasanovsky: Basically intellectual history in Europe, not China or whatever. He was totally stunned when people quoted Marx or Lenin on the eighteenth century. What did they know? Why should they be quoted? Of course, we [Russian historians] live with it. Therefore there is always this dual situation. In a sense, Henry May is correct. In another sense, when you are in the field of Russian history, you may say happily, for example, that they quoted Lenin only in the introduction and not in the text.

By the way, I heard a good joke recently--I just might mention to you I'm afraid my interview is a series of jokes, but it's one way to survive in the world. In this case, the story is that Walter Ulbricht, the head of East Germany, died in 1973, went to the Marxist heaven and immediately asked to see Karl Marx because he wanted to clarify some theoretical points with him. They said, "Karl who?" They searched and searched. Finally they said that, yes, there was a Karl Marx, and he found Karl Marx in the section on the archives in a small room. "You are Karl Marx. How come you are almost forgotten in this little corner?" He said, "I was guilty of mistakes. One, I came from a middle-class family. Two, I married a woman of lower nobility. Three, I migrated to the West. But the worst was four: They couldn't find in my works a single reference to Lenin." [laughter]

Well, that is about the intellectual level of much Soviet writing. But then on the other hand, there is very much, every reason for all students of Russian history to know Soviet writings. Again, it's nice to speak of it in the past, but the past is yesterday; we don't have a new great period superseding it as yet. I gave the Bernard Moses Lecture here on the campus, and in that lecture, I used as the title a metaphor or symbol which is fashionable these days, *Half Empty or Half Full?: Observations on Soviet Historiography* (delivered on October 22, 1985). Well, first of all, half empty: Of course, everything is pervaded by ideology. And unfortunately for those concerned, it's an extremely well-developed ideology. In theory at least--the theory is, if you will, utopian and fantastic--but in theory everything can be stated and should be stated correctly. There is no intermediate area; at least if something is not clear, clarify, but everything has to be scientifically correct.

Lage: So this is their view of--

Riasanovsky: Of everything, but including history. But you see, this means that anything can be attacked as ideologically wrong.

One famous humorist had a fine children's book, he was a great children's writer, and there it was that they should be clean and not look like chimney sweeps. It was denounced for "denigrating chimney sweeps."

Lage: Anti-proletarian [laughter].

Riasanovsky: Yes. And that again was the one thing that hit Henry May so hard. So it is enormously, enormously pervasive, unfortunately. In theory, absolutely pervasive. It is also down to small and even unnecessary details. For instance, a very fine scholar told me how he sent a note to the Hermitage Museum for their publication, their journal, about a Russian eighteenth-century painting and its provenance. What happened was that it was painted in Russia in the eighteenth century, then somehow disappeared, and a grand duke, some member of the imperial family, found it in Holland and bought it and gave it to the Russian imperial museums. They crossed out "grand duke." Which is totally nonsensical, because in an imperial society who has money to buy paintings abroad if not a grand duke?

There is, for instance, enormous hostility to the church at any time, any place. Of course, Marx and others--you see, Marx may be in his little room now--recognized that sometimes the church was the main expression of even class struggle. It is the nature of religious societies to present in religious forms basic issues. So it is fantastically petty and even sort of completely stupidly so.

Lage: And so transparently.

Riasanovsky: Yes. Then again, and that was Solzhenitsyn's main point-- Brodsky, who died recently, made perhaps the best statement in defense of Solzhenitsyn, "He's always wrong when he speaks of the West, but then, always right when he speaks of Russia"--Solzhenitsyn's big point of course was the Big Lie--that in the Soviet Union people do not believe what they say. And that makes it especially bad because even if you take other wrong doctrines, let's say, the white man's burden doctrine defending imperialism, most people believed in it.

Lage: And in the Soviet Union this wasn't the case?

Riasanovsky: No. Well, you couldn't, because even if you, for example, accept Stalin as the greatest genius, how can you accept that he suddenly stopped being one? In that sense, the version of the Big Lie is completely appropriate.

Lage: Do you think that it was a game that intellectuals played, in a sense? I mean, a pretty serious game.

Riasanovsky: Yes, a very serious game. It's interesting exactly how it was done. Of course, many people were arrested, whole branches of study destroyed, et cetera, but perhaps in later times it was done mainly by editors and such others. A system like that also of course breeds defenses, so you want to be perfectly sure that you are not caught, so you are extremely careful to say everything correctly.

Another very vicious aspect of this system: people who don't know it would say, "Well, of course, they write about everything from their point of view." It's not just that. Many things you do not write about at all from any point of view. So if I were writing on Soviet historiography--if I had a very long life, I might do it--you could judge it by what you could write on, at all. And apparently the basic decisions are taken at a very high level.

There are at least two sources for this story of how the populists disappeared from sight. The populists were the main radical and revolutionary movement from the 1860s--well, even into the revolution; it was their party that had the majority in the Constituent Assembly that was disbanded by Lenin in January, 1918.

Lage: This is the populists?

Riasanovsky: Yes, narodniki in Russian. The case was publishing something by [Michael] Bakunin, who was not only a populist but also an anarchist, and generally of course a very disturbed and disturbing figure. [Alexander] Herzen said he was born not under a star but under a comet.

In any case, after Stalin said, "What do you want to do here? Breed terrorists?", the populists disappeared from Soviet writing. Gradually they came back, as in the works of my friend, B.S. Itenberg. Then, gradually also, the liberal Cadet party [Constitutional Democratic party] became a possible topic. But I knew one scholar who was of course perfectly safe from their point of view and so on, but who still couldn't publish his main work. He published it after the collapse of the Soviet Union. So as I say, the situation was considerably worse than just having the correct point of view. First of all, you had to be allowed to have any view, and then it had to be correct.

Isolation of Soviet Scholars

Riasanovsky: There are many other bad aspects of it which perhaps are not inherent, but closely connected, such as tremendous isolation.

Lage: Intellectual isolation?

Riasanovsky: Intellectual isolation, isolation in terms of travel. When added to that constant shortage of funds and especially in history, humanities, and less so in sciences, one of the best gifts you could give would be almost any book. The U.S. Constitution, anything. Almost no Soviet scholars could order books.

Lage: Was it dangerous for them for you to give them a book?

Riasanovsky: Depends on the nature of the book. A funny thing happened with Hedrick Smith's famous book, *The Russians*. I had decided to read it because my students were reading it, among other things. So I was reading it on the plane, and I came to Moscow, and I had to check into the embassy, and I walked in with that book, and there was a great exclamation of delight and surprise: how did I dare bring in this book? Well, I simply carried it and read it. I figured out why, I think. Because this book was absolutely banned. The book is a good book.

Lage: Who was the author?

Riasanovsky: Hedrick Smith, *The Russians*. Now he wrote *The New Russians* and other things--perhaps television serials, but in any case, the book was basically good. It was not a great book at all; it was in some sense naive without his realizing it in places. For example, he said, "Strange people, these Russians. They are so emotional; when they meet or part, everyone kisses everyone else. But when they go to a concert, I've never heard them break out in applause, they always wait." Well, you could of course reverse it and say, "Strange people, these Americans. They break up concerts but they never kiss." [laughter]

On the whole, it was a good book. But why was it so forbidden? I have no proof, but have a good guess. It particularly dealt with people who make money and have fine positions because they are in charge of contacts with the West. And these are the people who would read the book. So

the embassy was delighted and fascinated that I just brought it in. It never occurred to me not to.

Basically it was also the financial situation [contributing to their isolation]. The difference was between your own currency and foreign currency. And foreign currency simply could not be had by almost anyone. Obviously the spies had it, I'm sure, and the diplomats and some others. That was the situation.

Great isolation--I could list many things. For example, Brucker tells me a very fine Soviet scholar on the Italian Renaissance who was allowed to go to a meeting in Florence and wrote a letter--I didn't know the scholar; I read the letter, published in a periodical. There he said that it was so nice to have been in Florence for three days, but he hoped that arrangements could also be made for a longer stay. And he was a historian of Florence.

Or again, I was this time at what was then Leningrad University--formerly St. Petersburg, Petrograd, now again St. Petersburg--I was usually very well received; in general everyone helped me when they could. The limit being precisely Hedrick Smith's type of situation and so on. And they said they had a wonderful, wonderful English guidebook to St. Petersburg. And by the way, some of the best guidebooks are not available in Russian because they are for foreigners. And then they ran around and came back and said, "We're out of English guides." Then one of them finally said, "Perhaps you read French." Well, what European historian doesn't read French? [laughter] That was a very great university in old times. My mother went to it; my father went to Moscow University.

The Full Half: Some Good History and Access to Primary Sources

Riasanovsky: It's a very strong empty half, and we appreciate Henry May's reaction, and it's really a disaster. But then there's also a full half. First of all, Russian history is in Russia. Geographically, in terms of sources, and so on--just like French is in France, and Italian in Italy. And Florentine in Florence [laughter]. (Brucker is the greatest expert on Florentine archives.) And of course, partly because of this isolation--there are usually good reasons--and now that is to a large extent broken, although there are of course

difficulties such as no money, such as crime, so it's not ideal conditions for research. But at least most of the prohibitions are off.

Lage: It is easier to get into the archives?

Riasanovsky: Yes. And to get things that you want in the archives. One of the wonderful things about former days was sometimes they selected what they thought you should have [laughter].

Lage: Did this happen to you?

Riasanovsky: Yes. Well, my first two books on the Slavophiles and official nationality were written without--

Lage: Before you could go there.

Riasanovsky: I went first in '58, and the second book was published in '59, so it was already ready. I did what I could; there are excellent libraries in the West. In general, for the nineteenth century and the twentieth centuries--for instance, it's generally estimated for the nineteenth century of published works, excluding in-house memoranda or something, school regulations for students, the West--meaning this time outside the Soviet world; Finland is in the West in this case--has about 75 percent of publications. In the eighteenth century, only 25 percent. Part of the difference is precisely Finland. Finland became part of Russia in 1809, and from 1809 to 1917, the University of Helsinki library was one of three depositories of everything published in the empire, the others being Moscow and St. Petersburg.

So I could use that, and of course I did. That's how I spent a year in Finland. So it wasn't that desperate, but nevertheless opportunities were limited, and as a result very many of our students sort of think that a field is several books in English, which is of course nonsense.

Lage: That if they master several books in English--

Riasanovsky: Yes, that's what they generally feel. They don't know Russian work or Russian materials, or don't know it enough. That again is being broken down. We have now people that stay there for a long time--in one case, a Cossack area, and the woman became a great friend of the Cossacks; she has almost been made an honorary Cossack. Before the collapse of the Soviet Union that would have been impossible. But nevertheless, a great effort has to be made to make it clear to students that fundamental material is in Russian. I told

you already that when people ask, "How well should I know Russian for Russian history?", my answer is, "As well as English for American history." Ideally, at least, it's a goal you should work toward. If you are going to spend a lifetime at it, you have a chance if you try.

So that is the first point. Now that in turn has several subdivisions. First of all, almost all primary sources are there. It depends. For instance, one reason--not in my case probably, because I was also interested in philosophy, but much of my work is based on published books. For instance, even *The Image of Peter the Great*, well, the image is mainly published, of course. And that's one reason why intellectual history was so prominent. It's much easier to write on Dostoevsky abroad than on landholding in the Russian northwest in the thirteenth century.

And it's not only a matter of materials. Another aspect of it is that Soviet books have used materials which we didn't have. Now they're quoted, summarized, or whatever. I had a good example of it with one student of ours, now a fine professor who--by the way, a man of the Left, not of the Right at all; the division is not simply Left and Right. I suppose if the Soviet system were to take over in the future, our leftists would be shot first. Or at least many of them. But in this case, we were talking about something, and I said something about Soviet writings on that topic, the topic being the 1905 revolution. He said, "Oh, I dismissed those writings." I said, "All right, if you dismiss those writings"--I had just finished reading his manuscript; that was the main topic of our conversation as we spent the afternoon--I said, "Why then do you mention historian A so often?" He said, "Well, historian A is an exception. He's fine." I said, "How about historian B?" He said, "You must know what I think of historian B, but he is the only person to use these documents." Okay, historian C? "Historian C is in a class by himself, he is so good. Don't even mention him with the others." Well, he was intelligent; he got the point. There are always historians A, B, and C, as well as others, as you study your subject.

Furthermore, good history could be and was written in the Soviet Union. There are several things to consider here. First of all, the 1920s do not count. Of course, historians died of hunger and all kinds of disasters, but there was no complete ideological control. That starts with about '32, with Stalinization, and lasts until the collapse of the Soviet system. But even within the established system, there of course were better days and worse days. For instance,

after Stalin's death there was a certain détente, a thaw, or ottepel as sometimes it's called, and that was better than the last years of Stalin and Zhdanov.

It also depended on areas of history. For instance, it was easier to write good books on economic history than on religious history.

Lage: It didn't come under tremendous ideological control?

Riasanovsky: Well, it's less so. I mean, if you really want to establish what were peasant holdings in one area, you may include in the introduction that Marx said that peasant holdings were important. The famous line is that Lenin said, "Read books."

Lage: So you would start with kind of a framework.

Riasanovsky: We'll come to that in a moment. There are frameworks, to be sure. Then again, it was really important at what level you wrote. In general, if you wrote for specialists on a narrow topic, you had to worry less than if you wrote a general book on some prominent figure, with mass circulation. And that became increasingly so in the [Leonid] Brezhnev era; you could get some specialized books which were not much affected by the climates. If you consider all these possibilities, books varied.

Soviet Historians and The Image of Peter the Great:
"Do What Your Government Tells You"

Then, a more interesting point, perhaps--within the Soviet system, the prescribed model, it was possible to write good books depending again on what you were writing and about what. For example, when I wrote my book *The Image of Peter the Great in Russian History and Thought*--

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Lage: You were saying that your book on the image of Peter the Great included the Soviet period, which was not true of most of your writings.

Riasanovsky: Yes. Except for my *History of Russia*, where there of course is a Soviet period but in proportion to other periods. So it's not in any sense dominant. And it's more general. The more specialized research work, the largest piece on the

Soviet Union, is the Soviet section in *The Image of Peter the Great in Russian History and Thought*.

By the way, I must thank my Soviet colleagues. People helped me the best they could. I wanted two things especially when I went to the Soviet Union: one, eighteenth century materials, the image in the eighteenth century, because as I mentioned earlier eighteenth century materials may be available in the West only to the extent of 25 percent as against 75 percent for the nineteenth century. And secondly, also contact with and discussions, etcetera, with the Soviet makers of the image.

Lage: The makers of the image.

Riasanovsky: Yes, the Soviet image. I was received very well, but it soon became clear that they did not want me to write on the Soviet period. I usually brought it up only with friends; by that time it was my fourth trip. I've had friends in various ways; for example, I think I mentioned one historian who has helped me very much, and I finally said, "I'm really ashamed to take so much of your time and effort. Why do you do it?" And he said, "Because one of your father's books was an event in my life." So I said thank you.

But the point is that it always came up something like, "Well, you are a very fine historian. Why write on contemporary subjects?" This, by the way, could come from some of my Oxford professors, but the context would have been different. It became clear that it was simply too painful a subject. It's interesting how it sort of was modified. I could write on the 1920s. You remember it was in the early 1930s that there was established a full system. And of course I could write about any historian abroad, but don't discuss the Soviet situation.

One person I respected very highly said, for instance, "Here you write, let's say, of Ivanov--Ivanov writes something on Peter the Great, and you include that, and then later he recants in an article that he was wrong here and there. How do you know that Ivanov wrote that article?" I said, "Of course I don't. But at the same time, there are ways of handling it. You could say that later the signature of Ivanov appeared on an article." So essentially what it was is that it was simply too painful to remember. Now they reconstruct that period, but until the collapse of the Soviet Union they couldn't. They now have a fine joint history of historiography. Fine because it's very rich. Here it is

[shows a four-volume work]. And it could not include the thirties, the purges--until the fall of the Soviet Union.

Lage: Four volumes and it's--

Riasanovsky: They tried several times, and that volume was still missing because there's really no way to put it in in any decent shape. And I suppose if I knew very little perhaps I would be allowed to write, but if you understand anything, you don't.

In any case, I was working at that point in Leningrad, in the *Dom Pushkina*, the House of Pushkin, which is the Russian Literature Institute of the Academy of Sciences. Somewhat to my surprise, I was asked to give a talk on my research. I never taught in the Soviet Union; all my exchanges were for my own research. When I was asked to give them a talk, I always accepted. If it was canceled, I never worried.

There are some wonderful things--I remember I was once asked to speak on Fourier, who was a utopian socialist. It hadn't been scheduled; I was asked just before I was about to leave to go back to Paris, but I thought it's a very interesting subject, of course I should accept. I finally may get a real Marxist critique of my views. The room was full of old people who were saying, "Does this café still exist in Montparnasse?" They had not been to Western Europe for decades [laughter]; so that was your socialism. And your institute.

Well, returning to my House of Pushkin speech, it was a very interesting and memorable time. It lasted for about five hours. First I gave a talk, and there was a formal critique, then there was a general discussion. Things went on and on.

Lage: Now was the critique from a Marxist perspective?

Riasanovsky: Yes, and others--one said that she didn't hear me mention Lenin. I said, "In this company I thought it unnecessary." [laughter].

Lage: Did people laugh?

Riasanovsky: Some did, yes. In any case, there was one man who kept cutting in. Some of his remarks were good, some of them were not so good, and on and on it went, and finally we ended at about five o'clock, and five is dark in St. Petersburg at

that time. And then he said, "You know, you may not find your way to the metro. Could I show you the way?" Well, I had been finding it the last three months; it was about a block away. I said, "Of course, show it to me." So we wound up walking up and down the Nevskii Prospekt, the Champs Élysées of St. Petersburg, and talking. He was telling me a strange story of how a leading Soviet scholar was his great patron and then became his great enemy, and how this great scholar was terrorizing him. At one point he came, reportedly, to the printing press and broke up the paper that was already being made to be published by that scholar. Well, of course, I'd like to know the other side of the story--such quarrels of course happen elsewhere, although the Soviet system had its own special things. One thing that was special there was that one man could be so important. In our case, you see, you always have committees, and you always have levels.

Because he was talking this way, I finally said, "You know, could I ask you a more personal question?" He said, "Of course." "This day I'll never forget, to speak about Peter the Great and his image in the center of St. Petersburg with people who know so much. It was really a wonderful experience, and the entire visit this time, working in the Hermitage materials, in Moscow, etcetera. But one thing makes me question a little: so many people here, my colleagues, your colleagues, tell me not to write on the Soviet image of Peter the Great. Or some say to write a separate article and publish it in some unknown journal. What do you think? Should I write or not?" And he said, "Write. By all means, write." I said, "Well, why do you say so?" "Don't listen to them. Do what your government told you."

When I returned, [President Jimmy] Carter was very busy, I did not call him, I didn't say, "Do we absolutely need this Soviet part?"

The Soviets' Bifocal Image of Peter the Great: Framework for Their Historical Writings

Riasanovsky: But the point is that the Soviet part was researched and written, and it is bifocal--a two-centered image of Peter the Great, which goes as follows: that, on the one hand, he was enormously great, enormously good for Russia, enormously important, as general, as the creator of the navy, naval commander, the builder of the war industries.

Lage: All this was fine.

Riasanovsky: Great, not just fine. It couldn't be better. A diplomat, etcetera. On the other hand, he was horrid because this strengthened the feudal state in Russia that the peasants, which was 90 percent of the people, ended up paying three times as much dues and taxes, that so many of them were destroyed in the war, that St. Petersburg is built on human bodies, costing more than any battle, etcetera. You can even read, for example--of course the Soviets believed in progressive history and scientific development--that Peter the Great set Russia back 150 years.

So there are these two completely different foci, and the important point is not that some things were good, some things were bad, but that some things were enormously great, and some things were enormously bad. Well, if you think about it, within that basic framework you can write good books. For example, good books have been written on Peter's work with the army. He created the modern army. He created the navy out of nothing. On the other hand, good books have been written on the enormous pressure on the people and the destruction of whole peasant areas because of the enormous demands of the state. And these could be genuinely fine books, and some were, and some of course were not, but that's true of any historiography.

Lage: Did they use their sources honestly, so you could depend on--

Riasanovsky: Again, that depends. With serious historians you rarely get complete falsification. But of course so much depends on what you select. And again, you use your sources in connection with this framework. It's not quite clear-cut--for example, the economic policy of Peter the Great is subject to different interpretations because of the difficulty of fitting it into the scheme; some of it is of course obviously good, but then in another sense the feudal state was so strong, and you can therefore even get quite

different books well-written on certain aspects of it, and that I think is representative of very much else. So you could even have good books quite within the system.

Beating the System

Riasanovsky: Now you spoke about beating the system. It of course became a great game. Perhaps the most common way to do it was to include programmatic Marxist statements in the introduction and the conclusion and do nothing with them in the text. I don't know whether one should laugh or cry when one of the best, perhaps the best Russian historian of the nineteenth century--who died recently, unfortunately before the Soviet Union collapsed--tells me, "Nikolai Valentinovich, now note that I mention this view in the introduction and the conclusion and not a word of it in the text."

Lage: So he pointed that out to you?

Riasanovsky: Yes. By that time we were close; he could have pointed out anything to me. But the point is that that's what he's proud of. You don't know whether to say, "How wonderful; you beat the system," or to cry, "Look at what you have to do; what nonsense!" The theory he excluded by the way--he is the best authority on the emancipation of the serfs--was Nekhinya's theory which was at that time popular, that the emancipation in 1861 came primarily because of peasant unrest and rebellions. In other words, it was forced by the militancy of the peasants, which was nonsense.

Lage: He excluded that?

Riasanovsky: He put it in the introduction and conclusion, as I say. But his presentation clearly showed that that made no sense at all.

So that is one way to do it. Sometimes it's more complicated than that. I had one favorite book--by the way, people in the field have their favorites that way--that book was on the radical and progressive spirit and movement in Russia in the second quarter of the nineteenth century. The point is that there was none. In fact, this book is a good example of negative evidence and very useful because the man --who was a professor in Moscow--went through the archives. I didn't. So I know there was nothing to find.

Lage: And how did he treat it in the book?

Riasanovsky: Well, in the book whatever is said, he said, "How wonderful; someone writes that you must also think of the workers. So this is a great achievement; no one in the West writes about thinking of the workers at that time." He did find a few odd things. One was a constitution--of course, Russia was an absolute monarchy--which some landlord composed for his own edification, in his own estate. He found it. The fascinating thing is the name of the landowner was Berdiaev, the same as the philosopher, so Berdiaevs were always at it. But in this case, sometimes you really have a rather outrageous--ranging from very skillful to outrageous--contradiction between conclusions and presentation.

Lage: Now in the case of this scholar, was he hoping to reveal that there was really nothing in that period, or do you know?

Riasanovsky: I don't know. I don't know him personally. It might have been an assignment; there was no such book on that topic for good reasons, but he was a specialist in the area, so I don't think he is a simple-minded person. But a simple-minded treatment in order to find whatever you can--the constitution by the landlord out of nowhere; there are some arrests for blasphemy, protests against the church; a footnote in one of them was, "Let him go; he was totally drunk."

Lage: So even that book tells you something about--

Riasanovsky: Yes, but you see, that's a good example of how the book was valuable. I think it's pretty much guaranteed that unless something totally unexpected shows up, there was no great radical revolutionary movement anywhere, because his assignment was to find it. I think too much of him to think he really expected to find it, but who knows. So you see that's another way of handling it.

This is less provocative to the uninformed reader than some books which, for example, would--I'm transposing into our terms--discuss, let's say, the University of California today, whatever troubles we have, with the *Daily Cal* as the main source, and say that obviously we're on the edge of revolution [laughter]. But such books also exist. In addition, there were ways to beat the system--still another reason why it was worth reading Soviet books. So you see why the glass was half full and half empty.

X VISITS TO RUSSIA, 1958-1994

First Visit, with Theo Von Laue, 1958: Befriended by a
Pseudo Electrical Engineer

Lage: Would you want to talk about some of your visits? I would be interested to know what it was like for you to go there for the first time.

Riasanovsky: For the first time, I went with Theo Von Laue; you read his article. ["Interview with Theodore H. Von Laue," *The Historian* (October 1995)]

Lage: And when was this?

Riasanovsky: Summer of '58. And that was still very early in terms of visits; foreigners were very rare. But we had a car and a driver. Obviously, you don't go on your own. Our car would stop, and kids would gather around to see the car. Furthermore, Theo went first and flew in, and I went by train from Helsinki to Leningrad. I remember when I was put in one of the world's famous hotels, Astoria--a small, at one time a very high-level hotel in Leningrad--a man, an employee of the hotel, was helping me with my things, parting the curtains in my room. And he obviously wanted to ask something, so I said, "What is it?" And he said, "Comrade, can you tell me where you were during your last foreign assignment?" And I said, "Far away." The point being of course that at this early visit, I could be identified as a Russian--of course I speak Russian natively--only if my dress could be accounted for. But you see, if I come from a foreign assignment, it's appropriate.

Lage: You didn't explain to him.

Riasanovsky: No. In the meantime, Von Laue was already fighting the police. Von Laue had a marvelous camera, a unique camera, custom-made by the Planck Institute in Berlin, to take pictures. I still have his pictures and slides, I use them in my class.

People would gather and say, "We don't have such a camera," and Theo's answer was, "We don't either." The camera was German. But he was arrested for photographing anti-sanitary backyards, and they got his camera. Apparently they were satisfied with that, but he wasn't. So he went to the police, and he kept asking for higher and higher police officials, which more or less threw the station into a panic [laughter]. The last thing you would do in the Soviet Union is ask for a higher police official [laughter]. So finally they returned the camera, but not the film. And from then on, he did the photographing, I did the talking, and we were not arrested again.

Lage: I'm surprised even that they let him have the camera.

Riasanovsky: Officially, it was high-level tourism. They would tell us what he should take his pictures of, and so on. So there was a reason for it.

We had marvelous tickets--usually second or third row--for the best ballet, and there we were seated, and the man next to me started speaking English. Not bad, but not too good. I switched to Russian, and things went swimmingly, and he presented himself as an electrical engineer. He even had a pencil which said something like, "World Electrical Engineer Convention, Milan 1955," or something of that sort. We talked, then--it was almost white nights, the middle of the summer--we walked out and he said, "Do you want me to drive you around St. Petersburg and the suburbs?" Krasovskii, he said, was his name. I said, "Why, of course." Then we go across one of those enormous, magnificent plazas; there's one car standing. It's his car. So we go to his car, and we start driving, and we saw the palaces at night, et cetera. He was interested; he started asking how is the standard of life in the United States. And, always on my best behavior, I said, "Well, you cannot compare. For instance, here rent costs almost nothing. Education is guaranteed. Then, in other respects, we are ahead." He said, "No, there is a scientific way of discussing this question." I said, "Well, what is the scientific way?" He said, "The scientific way is to give your salary, your income, and then the cost of all kinds of products, and then it becomes a percent of your income." I

still remember those palaces--fortunately I shop for the family once or twice a week--so I remember still those palaces connected with white potatoes, so much [laughter].

He kept appearing, and we would get several such rides--

Lage: You mean over a period of time?

Riasanovsky: Over the week that we were in Leningrad. And Von Laue, you know him, said, "Do you think he's a spy?" I said, "Theo, what's the difference? We have nothing to hide." [laughter] And he said, "Still, is he a spy?" I said, "Theo, go to sleep."

Lage: Well, what do you think?

Riasanovsky: Of course he was. But the point is--by the way, the story has an answer, you'll see. In the same hotel Astoria, Theo even had a grand piano in his room. And he would still say, "Do you think we can trust him?" I said, "Who can trust anyone in this world?" [laughter] Then the engineer took us to his apartment. It was the first time I was in a Soviet home. This same car was taking us down. I sort of kept counting canals and so on--it's very easy to orient yourself in central Leningrad because of the canals, because of the geometric structure of it. So I probably could find that, if necessary.

Lage: In case you had to make your way back.

Riasanovsky: [laughter] And, well, we came to his apartment. At that time, almost all buildings except a few were old buildings, and the furniture was old--pre-1917--this obviously was the divide. So this was an old apartment building. I noticed it took three keys to open it. He said he lived with his mother--it was summer--but his mother was at some nearby resorts, so he was there alone. It had at least two rooms and a kitchen. So we sat down, and I noticed that there was a tremendous amount of old French literature. Some of it was in French, some in Russian, and we talked.

As I said this was '58, and at one point he said, "Well, this business in Hungary did us much damage, didn't it?" The revolution of 1956, of course. And I said, "Well, I suppose so. You had little to begin with, but you got less. The party, before the events, in England numbered 30,000; it became 15,000. In our country there generally was no party, but it became worse for it." But then I said, "But tell me how you here received it." And he told me a story which at

that time I did not place, but I placed it shortly after as a story by Anatole France, of [Pontius] Pilate being in Judea and then returning to Rome. And his friends say, "Pontius, how was your tour in Judea? Anything happen?" Pilate said, "No, nothing happened. Oh, yes, someone was crucified but nothing happened." "That's how we missed Hungary." And although Theo understood Russian, when he wanted to be absolutely sure, Krasovskii said, "Translate this to your friend in English." So I translated to Theo, we return to our hotel, and Theo says, "Do you think he's a spy?" [laughter] I say, "It's time to go to sleep."

Well, we parted as dear friends, and he said he might visit us in Moscow. He didn't. And Theo tried to correspond with him and never got an answer. I have, by the way, one interesting thing: I have a photograph of him at one of those palaces, taken with Theo's marvelous camera. We would meet at AHA meetings, and Theo would say, "Do you think he was a spy?" and I would say, "Take it easy." And then this happened: a close friend of mine, a Russian-French woman, went with the Coty exhibit, to Leningrad. And Krasovskii appeared. And he spoke perfect French. He presented himself as a professor of French. He, and at that time also his mother, took her to the same apartment. You see, if he had said he was a professor of French to us, we would immediately say, "Who is your teacher?" Well, I think that answers the question, you see.

Lage: So he was a spy?

Riasanovsky: Of course he was. My guess is that he was supposed to check us out, and we didn't present any special dangers, so he did not appear in Moscow. It's a strange thing that he used the same name with me and Von Laue and with Nathalie Droin, the woman in question.

Lage: And you just happened to discuss the experience with her.

Riasanovsky: Well, look at Theo's *Why Lenin, Why Stalin*.

Lage: And he talks about it in there?

Riasanovsky: Just read the dedication [hands interviewer the book].

Lage: You read it for the tape.

Riasanovsky: [Reads aloud] "To the students and faculty at the University of California at Riverside and with a heavier

heart to Boris Nikolaevich Krasovskii." And he stopped asking me if he was a spy.

Lage: The way he responded to you about Hungary--was that expressing his true feelings, do you think?

Riasanovsky: I don't know.

Lage: I mean, he had a job also that he was carrying out.

Riasanovsky: Yes, of course, and in a sense it was, you could say, a foretelling of what happened. Just as Pilate did not know what the results would be. But in any case there is also another interesting thing which perhaps helps define the point: we were counting potatoes and transportation, etcetera, and then he said, "You know I am an electrical engineer." We said, "Of course; that's what you said." He continued: "Would you like me to take you to my factory?"

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Riasanovsky: In the summer of '58 that he would ask to take us to an electrical engineering factory in Leningrad was so strange that I said absolutely nothing, as if I never heard him. And then we went back to other talk. And I'm very glad that Von Laue was there, because he also heard. And now perhaps if I said, "Oh, please take me," then they would have been more suspicious, and he would have paid more attention to us.

Lage: Well, that's really quite a tale. Was it an emotional experience for you to go to Russia, to see where your parents had grown up?

Riasanovsky: It's a big country. Neither grew up in Leningrad. But more generally--I don't know. It's perhaps that I had, should we say, a mixed life--I felt, as far as being with people, fine. Except again in this system, obviously I did not answer Krasovskii about the electrical factory. One interesting thing is that I started having again dreams in Russian. I have them in English in the United States and in French in France, usually.

I must say that I find it difficult when people say, "Do you consider yourself Russian?" In many ways, not, in other ways, yes. And I repeat, especially in this world of emigrés and people with no country, I feel fine. It is in some ways very interesting. For instance, I heard words I hadn't heard since childhood, especially of the more--should

I say--popular vein, which would not be in written books and so on.

I was always taken for a Russian when it could be done. It could be done in this first trip; the clothing had to be explained, because having a pair of shoes like I did--and I always dressed, and will again do so in April, down rather than up.

Lage: How would you dress when you say "dress down"? What would you wear?

Riasanovsky: I will not wear a tailored suit, and will not wear, obviously, my Oxford jacket [chuckle], which I use instead of formal dress, it can be so used. Somewhat like I'm dressed now, I suppose.

Perhaps if you are interested in this first trip, I can say also how I later parted with Von Laue [in Moscow], because Von Laue was going by train to Warsaw, and I was flying back to Finland the following day. So we were at the railroad station, and we had perhaps forty-five minutes, but forty-five minutes is not much in Soviet Russian time. I'm going into such detail because I would like very much to reconstruct exactly how I reacted, what the tone of my voice was, and so on, because of what followed. Anyhow, there I wanted to be sure he would get back, and I saw someone with a cap indicating that he was working at the station, and I said, "Kindly help this gentleman; he is going to the Warsaw train," and so on. And suddenly the man sort of snapped to attention, took Von Laue to the train, returned, and said, "I beg to report"--that's a new style, I guessed--"I beg to report that the gentleman is in his compartment. His suitcases are with him, he is comfortable, he is alone, and will not do any talking." [laughter]

Well, as I walked out of the station, I thought, "To whom do I report?" [laughter] And then suddenly I was very happy that the next day I was going to Finland. I returned to my hotel; we were staying at the Hotel Metropol in Moscow. There was one of my countrywomen, in a clear American pronunciation, saying, "And they say there are police here; I haven't seen any police." [laughter]

Lage: She came with a different set of eyes.

Riasanovsky: Yes. Of course now, you see, there is no order in the land. The same first trip--we went from Leningrad to Kiev to Moscow--I left in Kiev a worthless wire hanger, precisely

because it was worthless. And it was delivered to me in Moscow. Things then, you see, were under control.

An "Outstanding Bourgeois American Historian" in the Soviet Union

Lage: Now did things change over time in your early visits? I'm sure they've changed since the collapse of the Soviet regime.

Riasanovsky: The important point is that fundamentally it did not. The system, as it became firm in the thirties--and of course I knew it only from '58 directly--was the same until the collapse.

Lage: I'm just curious about as you developed friendships--

Riasanovsky: It's obviously different with friends.

Lage: How free were your fellow historians? Were most of your friends fellow historians?

Riasanovsky: Yes. First of all, people always think you have listening devices. And I'm sure there are enough listening devices, although obviously I'm not in a position to check. There is the famous story of some American--diplomat or whatever--moving in, and immediately the proper American specialist started looking at all the wiring. He cut off the wire, and the chandelier fell down on the floor [laughter]. I didn't try to cut any wires. But it is of course true that people speak much more freely walking down the Nevskii Prospekt than at home.

And there are other funny moments: one historian that I already mentioned, who became a friend, and I were eating dinner in his apartment, and then the phone rang, and he said, "You know, I have just now received permission for you to come to see me." [laughter]

Another case, of another friend, on a visit when Arlene came--Arlene usually stayed with the children in Paris, but came a couple of times for a week or so, which would be a fine week of being shown and seeing everything possible. This Mrs. Itenberg wanted very much to invite us to dinner, and she wrote to the Academy asking permission, and finally

she got an answer: "They are already given one dinner: Enough!" [laughter]

Lage: She reported that to you?

Riasanovsky: Not at the time. Later she did.

Von Laue, by the way, left Germany, as you read, in '36 or something, so he had three years of Hitler. And he says that the people were incredibly more regimented in Russia than in Germany. And I think he's correct. For one thing, the communists had many more years than the three years of the Nazis. Although I'm not saying that all the Germans were Nazis, because that would be nonsense, no doubt the government in Germany had stronger popular support than in Russia; there was also that kind of difference.

Lage: Would your friends ask you very many questions about American life or the university?

Riasanovsky: Yes. Many of them, of course, could ask about universities and so on, but not about everything. Once one was not afraid of listening devices, they could ask everything. People were generally polite and kind, and the one limitation of course was "one dinner is enough" [laughter].

There are almost any number of funny stories. For instance--this happened to a friend of mine--you get tickets and that was a wonderful thing, but painful in one sense; I'll tell you in a moment why. I had absolutely the best tickets for everything in Leningrad and Moscow.

Lage: And where do you get them? Through a government service?

Riasanovsky: Through the hotel where you're staying. After the first time I most often stayed in an academic hotel. The first time, it was one of the best, or the best, of the commercial hotels. And then someone would usually be following you. But usually I would sit in the fourth row, and he would be in the balcony in the first row. And one time the hotel got it mixed up: so my colleague got the balcony, and the man trailing him was in the second row standing, looking around until he saw him [laughter]. And there was a wonderful smile on his face [laughter].

Lage: So you were followed?

Riasanovsky: Oh, sure. Again, I don't think that everyone was followed all the time, or you couldn't have five-year plans.
[laughter]

Lage: That kept them pretty busy.

Riasanovsky: Yes, exactly.

Lage: Would you have been more under suspicion because of your Russian background?

Riasanovsky: Yes and no. One thing, of course, they knew that I could read, could understand, and so on. And that's undesirable. But on the other hand, I had a strong position--by the way, I was never approached by either our services or their services. There were some fantastic stories of one person deep in the archives, suddenly police appeared, saying if you do this or that. A friend of mine who had absolutely no Russian background, from Kansas, was approached. He had been in Russia, and then he flew to Finland. Suddenly he was told he cannot return to Russia. He had his research there and so on. And then he was told to come by the side door to the Russian consulate in Helsinki, and he was told that what they want him to do--they will provide all the archives and services--is to start a Soviet friendship society at the University of Kansas. Quite above board; there was nothing wrong [they said]. He refused, eventually he got his notes. Well, nothing of the sort happened to me.

My great advantage was that they knew rather precisely who I was--by the way, one of the advantages: my name was always correctly pronounced. People had no difficulty knowing it. And what was I doing, which was very good--I was writing and publishing books, that I really worked with the materials. One of my colleagues--well, Martin Malia, for that reason, infuriated them because it's of course his style of life, but he ordered a lot of books and never used them. That was a point against him. Perhaps it should be [chuckle]. But the point is that they had no difficulty placing me, and that's very important.

Lage: So they knew you were about serious scholarly work.

Riasanovsky: Yes, and who I was. And actually, my parents had no political record, although of course they were not Soviet. As I said, Father refused to return; Mother as far as I know was never asked. But the point is that, I would say, it both helped and hindered. It obviously helped when someone said that he was helping because one of my father's books

was an event in his life. I was presented as an outstanding bourgeois American historian who learned our language very well.

Lage: That's surprising. Maybe just to the uninitiated would it be surprising that they didn't identify your parentage.

Riasanovsky: That's sort of more formal, you see--they of course basically did. I'm afraid I at times exploited my knowledge of Russian. I was in Moscow with a French professor. We made an arrangement--we were in the same hotel--that we would speak half a day French, half a day Russian. Good for my French, good for his Russian; but he pretty much abandoned Russian, so we spoke French. And he was dying because there was no good coffee. I said, "Since you're dying, let me try to help." I finally found good coffee. I found good coffee in the Metropol hotel; at that time, we were not staying in the Metropol, the number one hotel, at the very top. So we sat down and ordered good coffee.

They always had plenty of supervisors; that's why they had no unemployment. For example, in every hotel on every floor there would be a woman sitting at the desk in the hallway checking who came in and out and so on. But there we are having good coffee, and a supervisor says to me in Russian, "You realize, comrade, that coffee is only for foreigners." I said, "Yes." So we ordered a second cup. She comes again, she says, "I told you, didn't I make it clear that it's only for foreigners?" I said, "You made it perfectly clear. Couldn't be clearer." So we ordered the third cup each [laughter].

Lage: Did she come back?

Riasanovsky: Eventually I told her I was American [laughter].

Lage: You must have had some fun with this.

Riasanovsky: Yes. It's also at times in its way, of course, painful because we had everything, and at least as of that time the sentiment was entirely pro-foreigner. Pro-American in particular.

Lage: Among?

Riasanovsky: The population in general. I felt no hostility at all. And I think for a very good reason: they blamed not us but their own government. But again, to compare with Germany, the Germans were with the government, but I repeat, for many

reasons, patriotism or whatever; they weren't all Nazis. And in Russia, they were against.

Of course, we had absolutely nothing to buy. Except books. Books were very cheap. The stores, even in these hotels for foreigners, were usually a disaster, including the porcelain. Certainly not worth having. And there were these Vietnamese people looking at it as if they were in a candy shop. For them it was great. In one case--I was their translator because they didn't speak Russian. I spoke French to them and Russian to others.

Lage: Now how did you come into contact with them?

Riasanovsky: We were in the same hotel. There was much shouting and waving hands. My perhaps best participation in Russian life was during this first visit; I was in the post office, and there was a group of people who were particularly poor and sort of out of place, and they were there because they were illiterate. That was '58; by now, there are no illiterate people. But they were illiterate, and there was a person who came at that time to write letters for them. And he didn't come. And I said, "Let me write the letters." And I spent the afternoon writing letters from these people to the Russian villages.

Lage: How interesting that must have been. Did you write an article about that or anything?

Riasanovsky: Not about the letters, no, but of course I remember that. That's one reason why I don't fall into Martin Malia's overall category of being seduced by the Soviet Union [laughter]. Enormous poverty stood out: "Send two eggs," someone is in the hospital.

Lage: So they were living in Moscow and hoping for--

Riasanovsky: Some eggs from the countryside. It's just one example.

Lage: I wonder what had brought them to the city.

Riasanovsky: Probably some work. Generally it was considered--and it still is--a privilege to be in the city. And you had to have working credentials or something for it.

Another example of using my language, I also wanted to eat well, and I discovered it was very difficult. It was my misconception that, since I was going--officially it was called first-class--well, now, I will really have good

Russian food. My grandmother provided magnificent Russian food. Of course, there really was no good Russian food in the Soviet Union. I suppose perhaps in the Politburo circles, but I never got that high [chuckle]. But I still over a period of time developed the technique, which was to go to the best restaurant at the worst time. One benefit of that stemmed from the fact that some restaurants could serve drinks, let's say, only beginning at five, and I went earlier.

So I got into a good restaurant--you rarely get a table all to yourself. It was a table for two, and there was a man opposite me, and he was a civilian in dress, probably military otherwise, and we started talking generally. And I realized that he was a military advisor to the Egyptian government. This was shortly before Egypt broke with the Soviet Union. From then on, the conversation was interesting, because I tried to ask him significant questions without being too specific in case I'm arrested. I said, "Why are Egyptians such poor soldiers?" He said, "I'll tell you why. Because they have no concept of the dignity of man. Often I would say, 'Let me talk to the soldiers.' And the officers would say, 'Why should you talk to them?' " So we had a good discussion, and then I got up first--typically again, for the Soviet Union, without introducing ourselves. And then he said, "Comrade, you must also be doing important work." I said, "I certainly am," and walked back to the library [laughter]. Those days are fortunately gone.

Perhaps the most memorable restaurant meeting--you see, Arlene would visit me as I said for seven or ten days. Once in Moscow, once in Leningrad--this was Leningrad. I wanted to get her into a good restaurant on the same Nevskii Prospekt--Champs Élysées--where I walked with the other man--and several strange things are connected with that. One was that I stood in line, and someone--well, we were speaking English, she and I--she doesn't speak Russian. And this man came and addressed us in English. And I answered him in Russian, then he came and again addressed us in English; then I realized he prefers English. He worked in the restaurant, and he said he could get us in. Well, he got us in. He also told a story which may or may not be true, that he was about to go to the United States permanently because there was a medical convention, and there were two American doctors walking, and he came up and said, "Sign this paper, that I am your cousin, and I can come to the United States." They did [laughter]. In our

case, if this was police provocation, at least styles in provocations changed.

So we got in. And we were at a big table of mostly naval officers. I was speaking English to Arlene, Russian to the naval officers, and then one of them said, "What language do you speak to her? Finnish?" Finland is nearby. I said, "No, English." "Why English? Who is she?" I said, "An American." He said, "Kakoi molodets, zhenilsia na amerikanke!"--What a wonderful fellow; you married an American!" [laughter]

Lage: And these were naval officers.

Riasanovsky: Yes. And I didn't have the nerve to tell him that in our country it's simple [laughter].

Well, I think we've probably had enough for today. That covers the Soviet Union.

Lage: Well, we didn't talk about it since the changes.

##

During Perestroika, a Conference of Historians, 1990

[Interview 8: March 27, 1996]

Lage: This is our eighth session, and we're plunging ahead, continuing our topic from last time.

Riasanovsky: To a victorious conclusion.

Lage: Right. Last time we talked about the Soviet Union, and we were interrupted before we got into changes that you may have noticed in your visits to Russia under Mikhail Gorbachev and later.

Riasanovsky: Yes. I visited in 1990 for a conference. The spring of 1990, I think. That was my fifth visit altogether. My sixth visit was again to a conference. The first [in 1990] was in Moscow, the second near Moscow in the summer of 1994.

Lage: And then you're going again this spring?

Riasanovsky: I'll give some lectures between the twenty-second and the thirtieth of April, again in Moscow--in the Kremlin, no less, but I don't think [Russian president Boris] Yeltsin will attend [laughter].

Lage: What changes did you notice?

Riasanovsky: It changed tremendously. All these are subjects for books and not five minutes.

Lage: Of course. That's a problem with trying to get your impressions recorded here, but we won't hold you to this as the definitive account.

Riasanovsky: It's also interesting that these two conferences were different. The first was clearly a conference of the people in control, of the top historians--in other words, the establishment. The second had more young scholars, and at both there were some foreign scholars.

It's difficult to describe because the topic is so vast and many-sided, but essentially it's an enormous change because, of course, the entire system collapsed. It should be looked at from many angles, but except for those who are very young--and that's an important distinction--you had people who lived and worked through the years of the Soviet Union. So in a sense, it's people trying to salvage or understand or adjust after a lifetime's work.

In the earlier conference [in 1990] of the establishment--it was a large conference--there were many people. But I would say that only a very few sort of broke clear of the past, at least logically or theoretically-- perhaps the most striking example of this group is Afanasyev, a world-famous figure--I talked with him shortly after his talk, which was more or less a complete denunciation of the Soviet period, and that evening or the following day or whatever, he left the party. But his was a small cluster.

Lage: So that was an unusual action?

Riasanovsky: At that time, in that group. The group, I repeat, was the establishment of the Soviet Union. There was another small cluster on the other extreme. I remember one woman, I was seated in the first row so I had the feeling she was screaming at me; she was actually screaming of course to the entire gathering, and her point was that all this happened because people didn't read Lenin correctly, and all you have

to do is read Lenin correctly, and things will return to their proper course. And I had an enormous desire to ask, "Is one allowed to read someone else?" But there was that cluster.

In the middle, and the largest number by far, were people, as I already indicated, who were trying to make the adjustment, trying to save something from their lifetime of work. The tension was very high. We were told that--I gave a report, my critique of the Soviet view of the image of Peter the Great, but it was almost a comic relief compared to the heavy weight of other presentations. We were told that all the reports and all the comments, the entire thing, will be published. It still hasn't been; it could be simply that publication is hard now in Russia, and they didn't get to it. But I can understand why the statement was too optimistic. For instance, one historian accused another historian of writing to Stalin recommending that two leading historians be shot.

Lage: So politics did surface.

Riasanovsky: I was saving it for a particularly hard moment in our department meeting, but it never occurred so that it could be appropriate [laughter]. Again, one historian complained that he wrote--now it's possible to do that, and it has been done--a total denunciation of the establishment. But the editor of the historical periodical, to whom he sent it, left everything intact about people who had died and crossed out everything about people who were still alive. Well, again, you know, if I were editor, with the nature of these accusations--I suppose you should check it.

So that was the mood. Professor Rybakov, whom I referred to earlier, prior to that meeting had made the great statement--he is a great specialist in prehistory and early history and also archaeology--that perestroika is completely correct for historians of modern times, but in the earlier period everything was in order [laughter].

So that was the mood. Also, beginning then, and it's worse now, was simply the great deterioration of material conditions.

Lage: And that had started by '90.

Riasanovsky: It was going strongly but had not reached the proportions that it has now. One perhaps minor indication of it was that there was a banquet at the end of the conference; you

had to have a formal ticket--of course I got one--and wonderful hors d'oeuvres were served. And with my adaptability to the Soviet scene and past practice, I filled myself with hors d'oeuvres as well as drinks that were there, too--I forgot what I drank, probably vodka--but the point is that was the entire banquet. Other people did not eat, waiting for the main course--there was no further course. And the French delegation went to the cook protesting or asking, but were told, "You had your dinner." [laughter] I suppose now if I go there, there would be nothing served. But it is, of course, a very serious matter.

Soviet society was incomparably poorer than our society. This question of how do American professors live, how the country lives, are always difficult to answer for that reason. (I told you how I was calculating with my guide potatoes as against celery.) But in the Soviet framework, the establishment that met on that occasion, and even historians and intellectuals in general, were certainly a privileged group. They fell from what was a privileged or very privileged position to real poverty. And it's becoming worse. They are not supported, and even when there are salaries they are not paid. That's one thing Yeltsin promises to do before the election. And the International Monetary Fund is very worried.

Lage: How do they even put on an international conference?

Riasanovsky: For instance, I sent money to come from my chair.

Lage: I see, you bring money there.

Riasanovsky: Yes. I don't know that it was true of that conference, but we, the western world, have done very much in terms of subsidizing Soviet visits, subsidizing conferences, etcetera. At the Ford Foundation, they have stopped subsidizing American centers of Russian studies, but gave a million to a center in Moscow for Russian scholars there. So that's how things are done.

Some Observations of Post-Soviet Society, 1994

Riasanovsky: So you had this beginning in 1990, and you see I ate well that evening. My last conference in the summer of '94 was a different one because there were a great many young scholars, and on the whole they produced on me a very good impression. I always envy them in one sense: of course, they have all the archives and so on. But the standards were good, and the attitude was good, although of course there were still these shortages. And there were still presumably many people working in institutes which many think, rightly or wrongly, should be abolished, that they are doing unimportant work and not teaching, and so on. So that situation was bad, but my impression of the people was good.

Lage: And when you say young scholars, how young?

Riasanovsky: In their thirties or in their forties. Really young from my point of view [laughter]. In their case, I would be happy if there were some assurance that they will have jobs and will be able to work. Of course, that's precisely the assurance they don't have. Because on both occasions I was with a very academic group, that of course changes perceptions. Academic people, intellectuals, and younger scholars in particular, cannot help but be very happy with the greater freedom. For most of the society the greater freedom means much less.

Lage: It doesn't affect them as much.

Riasanovsky: No. You had a job, now you don't have a job. You know the famous joke in wartime that the Soviet officer was all the time asking about race relations in the United States and how horrible it is, and finally the American officer was angry and said, "Look, I can go back to my hometown tomorrow, stand in the central square and shout, 'To hell with [President Harry] Truman.' Can you do that?" And the Russian officer answered, "I can. I'll go to my town and shout, 'To hell with Truman.'" [laughter] But actually, he couldn't do it.

Lage: He couldn't?

Riasanovsky: No, because on your own denouncing the head of a government is totally unthinkable. When [President Richard] Nixon came to Moscow, American students were more or less restricted to their rooms because they were afraid they would say

something against him. From their point of view, it would be a major crime.

Lage: No individual foreign policy.

Riasanovsky: No individual anything, foreign policy certainly. Berkeley would be impossible, with its foreign policy in regard to Cuba, Tibet, and you name it.

Now, of course, that's gone. And for intellectual people it means a lot; for other people it means less or nothing, unless they were released from gulag camps or something, in which case, of course, it would mean very much.

As I say, I tried to talk to other Russians, whether taxi drivers or--usually it wouldn't be a taxi but some car assigned to the conference, not exactly a taxi--managers of the hotel where I stayed, an academic hotel, others. And I saw very little hatred or bitterness against other people, and that's interesting. Very little or none. That's very interesting because post-Soviet Russia has been compared to the Weimar Republic, in fact I think we'll have a conference on that subject this spring later. And of course I did not live in the Weimar Republic, but by all evidence we have, there was an enormous amount of hatred and bitterness and street fights, and that simply I did not see in Russia.

Lage: You mean against other groups in society?

Riasanovsky: Exactly. Right, I didn't see that at all. I also didn't see anyone who intends to conquer Ukraine, to return to Tajikistan, to fight over Estonia.

Lage: Did you see more interest in entrepreneurial activities or concern about just making a living?

Riasanovsky: Making a living is of course a main concern. For instance, most academic people now have to have other jobs, whether it's translation or journalistic work or what. That was one explanation: they're so busy that other interests lag. Very many specialists make the point that the division is by age, that while old people are lost, and retired people are especially lost, young people on the whole prefer the changes. Of course, quite a few became rich.

I was talking recently with Gregory Grossman, whom I consider the greatest specialist on the Soviet Union, and he said, "The group that profits from it profits unfortunately, because what it does is export capital, sell things and so

on, rather than build up the country." But anyhow, there is such a group, and I said, "How large?" And he said, "Probably about five percent." And I said, "How well off are they?" And he said, "Well, they're better off than you and I," which means very well off indeed. So that group exists.

I know some people who like being in entrepreneurial business; occasionally you read what to me is stupid but perhaps correct reporting; for instance, I remember in the New York Times, I believe, that a woman who was an academic in the institute is now selling things on the plaza but she is enthusiastic, she may have a boutique of her own, it's better to be doing that than writing useless papers for a useless system. To me, somehow it rings fake. But perhaps it isn't fake. I mean, it's hard for me to picture a historian who would prefer that to what in a former society was still historian's work and a guaranteed position.

It's less hard to imagine young people starting out in life and profiting from enterprises or selling or banking, which now is another new field. And many people in that group--young, principally--mention that it's wonderful that now we can do what we want. Although actually the possibilities are very limited. Nevertheless, you are not directed by the party, you are not sent to Kazakhstan to help pick cotton or whatever. So there are these possibilities.

A person whose parents are there, who himself is from Russia, told me that in Moscow as many as perhaps a third are better off now, which is a very considerable number, and probably more so in Moscow because of course there is more enterprise and possibilities.

Lage: So as many as a third of the population are better off than they were--

Riasanovsky: In Moscow, yes. As large a number as that. If Grossman is correct, five percent are really rich, a third are better off in Moscow, that's at least some positive things. It's very hard on retired people and elderly people, and the very unfortunate aspect of it--I didn't see too much of it because I had only two conferences and one was outside Moscow, so there was no social setting for it--is that people sell everything they have; there are long lines of people doing that.

But I noticed, for example, in the *Daily Californian* that one of the reporters was completely shocked when she went to, I think, Budapest, Hungary--it might have been Warsaw, Poland--and again found the same picture. She had never seen anything like it. She was terrified. So it's not uniquely Russian; it happens even in countries such as Hungary and Poland, which are considered successful, or largely successful, in making the transformation. But that of course is all explosive material for the forthcoming elections in Russia.

Lage: Do historians predict the future?

Riasanovsky: No. But I must say also that in my group, or groups, there is relatively little anti-American feeling--only one young person I remember said that he never would want to be an American millionaire. I said, "Don't worry, you will not."

Lage: Had there been anti-American feeling before that you noticed?

Riasanovsky: Much less. The feeling was entirely pro-American, which is interesting because we have everything--relatively speaking--and they have nothing, but I think a major explanation for it is that they quite rightly blame their own system.

By the way, one remark I remember I made last time but did not explain, was about a painful experience in getting theater tickets. Well, the point is this: as I told you, I had the best theater tickets, paying Soviet prices for them, which is \$1.20 for best opera seats and so on, but what was painful about it? The painful thing about it was that very few Soviet people can get them. And my particular experience was that one of the times I went, I talked to some Russians in Paris, and they said that I should especially go to talk to one young woman and her husband because they are real connoisseurs of what there is. Which I did. He was a scientist, and she was an editor of an art periodical or something--perhaps dancing. I spent a very interesting evening with them outlining what I should see. I saw very much because I could go five times a week usually, and so on. The painful point came when I realized that here we are planning where to go, and that they couldn't get tickets.

Lage: Because they could not afford it?

Riasanovsky: No, because there are very few tickets. You could easily afford it; tickets are cheap. You can very easily afford it, but they're not available in general. Because I was a foreigner and a specialist, I could get them. Also, as I say, I paid \$1.20 or something of that sort--\$1.20 in American money--while they of course had no American money or no hard currency.

Lage: Are the cultural organizations being supported? The theater, the ballet?

Riasanovsky: There again you have a very bad situation. With the great drain of people going to the West--and again, they have better outlets than some because the better ones at least can travel and presumably get currency that way. But they have less support, and what is so important of course is that with inflation the support means so much less. Plus the fact that very often, even when you assign salaries to performers or funds for travel, they're not given.

. . . There were of course famous escapees earlier. I think I told you the story of Mikhail Baryshnikov when he came to the West [1974]. I was that evening in Leningrad at a performance and they usually had chocolate at the Kirov, sometimes strawberries and cream. But anyhow, the chocolate wrapper says on it, "Mishka na severe"--"There is a bear in the north," and there is a picture of that bear. And Mishka is also short for Misha--Mikhail. And that evening, na severe was crossed out, and it said not na severe but na zapade: "Mishka is in the west." [laughter]

But now people, and especially again in the top class, can leave much more easily, and many have. For instance, very many mathematicians. We now have mathematics professors here in our department who are Russian.

Lage: So the ones who can get positions.

Riasanovsky: Yes. Mathematics of course is important, because you don't need the language. In fact, one professor, a friend of mine in mathematics at the University of Washington, complained that he had very great difficulty in placing his students because the Russians beat them out. He said, "I can see why."

Lage: So the Russians--that was one of their strengths.

Riasanovsky: Always. It's something that does not need machinery to support it.

Lage: Have any of the Russian historians come to American universities?

Riasanovsky: Many had come when the State Department provided funds for visits, and the visits can even last a year. For instance, for the last several semesters we've at least had someone for the semester or the year, and then several people coming and giving lectures. There are individual exceptions. My colleague, Yuri Slezkine, is one of them, but he came before the system collapsed. But basically, no, they do not know English well enough, they do not know our system.

Lage: Our educational system?

Riasanovsky: How you grade, what you do. I remember--I'm not saying it's generally true; I have no evidence to go that far--but it's difficult to explain that you should be in your office at office hours. Extreme hierarchy--one of the noted professors who spent a year at Indiana blew up and said, "Why do I always have to have lunch with assistant professors?" [laughter] But language is the main point, and that is bad although it's improving rapidly. Because people who have many years of English--and many have--simply do not understand or use spoken English. It usually means that they know books. There have of course been translated lectures, and I've done translating--sometimes for very prominent people--but that's a bad system because you lose almost half the time. And you even lose perhaps some kind of immediacy in understanding.

So I would say, no, in history, not many. The prime fields would be mathematics first and above all, because mathematics is an extremely elite field. They always seem to know who are the best mathematicians. And of course it quite actually does not depend on the language. There has been some protest in the *Daily Cal* that they get instructors who know no English.

Lage: You do read the *Daily Cal* carefully [laughter].

Riasanovsky: Oh, I do, very much so. Some years back we had good poetry. Someone I remember described it in a letter to the editor: "A meaningless mass of moving gas." [laughter] But I do read the *Daily Cal*.

With engineering, even then there are difficulties. I know one son of a friend who moved from--apparently an outstanding engineer in aviation--who moved to Israel, and they told him that they don't have a job for him, but they

will pay for a year, or if necessary two years, for him to be retrained. Apparently there are two systems in the field of aviation: Russian and American. And Israel is entirely in the American system. In some sense his prospects are good because he is good, and they see it. On the other hand, you see, here a top man needs two years retraining. In mathematics that's impossible.

XI AN HISTORIAN

A Complex Heritage, and Ties to Traditions of Russian Historiography

Lage: Shall we move to our next topic?

Riasanovsky: [Looking at interviewer's notes, where he is asked to comment on the contribution of his unique background to his work as a historian.] Which is my uniqueness.

Lage: Your uniqueness, in your participation in both Western and Russian culture, and your ties, through your father, to the "main traditions of prerevolutionary Russian historiography," as you have expressed it.¹

Riasanovsky: Well, my background is not that unique. Let me explain.

##

Riasanovsky: Of course, very much of the Russian intelligentsia migrated. It's quite wrong to say that most of the people who migrated were intelligentsia. There are no exact figures on migration in part because it's difficult to draw the line. I mean, in eastern Poland, which was Russia, if people stayed in it did they migrate? Physically they didn't, and at the same time they're no longer in Russia, so you see what I mean. But there were not a million and a half intellectuals, but many of them were.

So my situation of having a Russian intelligentsia family and a Western education is not that unique, vaguely

¹"On History, Historians, and an Historian," *Russian History/Histoire Russe* 15, Nos. 2-4(1988), 415-426.

speaking. For instance, famous examples would include [Vladimir] Nabokov; [Igor] Sikorsky; [Igor] Stravinsky, and so many others. I'm of course younger than that, so in my case I was born outside, so that--for instance, in Paris you could find many people--well, that is an understatement--you had some of the greatest writers: [Ivan] Bunin, etcetera, and others, and their families, who are completely in Russian culture and yet also completely in Western culture.

Lage: What about your ties to the traditions of prerevolutionary Russian historiography through your study with your father?

Riasanovsky: First of all, some Russian historians became Western historians. [Mikhail] Rostovtsev, in ancient history, was the first Russian by origin who was president of the American Historical Association. He had difficulty choosing between Berlin and Yale. He spent many years at Yale. Obviously, he belongs to my father's generation, or even somewhat older than my father, let alone me. Outside that, in American historiography of Russia, there are quite a few people of Russian origin.

Another common group is Russian-Jewish origin. It deserves separate mention because there it would not be necessarily that Russian is the language of the family. So there are cases where the distance may be great--my colleague Zelnik was born in New York, but the family originally was from Lviv in western Ukraine. I don't know if that played any influence in his orientation, but you see, it ranged all the way from people like Zelnik to people who naturally speak Russian rather than any other language. So it is a considerable group, really. At the same time, I was very fortunate to have my father as a historian; Zelnik's father was not a historian. So I would say it's not unique, but from my point of view a fortunate example of this--and I would stand by both statements made here.

Lage: This was a statement from your essay "On History, Historians, and an Historian": ["I would like to think that the success of my *History of Russia* is not merely a fluke, but has some solid ground under it. One way to state this is to emphasize that my father was linked to the main traditions of prerevolutionary Russian historiography and that I managed to adapt that historiography, and whatever else I learned, to the American and Western scene. I flatter myself more generally that my background and experience give me both a thorough knowledge and indeed,

participation in the Western world, and yet, some independence from it through my Russian culture.")

Riasanovsky: Yes, I recognize it. And I think both parts of that statement are correct. What I somehow escaped--although again I'm not unique--is the issue of what culture do I belong to, what am I really, and so on. I've always felt that I am what I am, and that of course is also a tribute to the United States. I never felt like a foreigner.

Lage: And you haven't troubled over your identity.

Riasanovsky: No. I would in many other countries. For instance, this was a question asked by people in my situation in France. French policy became much more permissive after the Second World War.

Lage: Policy towards foreigners?

Riasanovsky: Yes. But before, it was very hard to become a Frenchman. Even if you were born in France I don't think you were automatically a Frenchman, and obviously if you came from the outside you were not, so there the identity is much more different and clear. I do appreciate my advantages and good luck.

Lage: The quote that we're looking at refers to your "participation in the Western world, and yet some independence from it through my Russian culture."

Riasanovsky: For example, I suppose my basic religious orientation-- again, the Western world is a rich world, but it is not in the main Orthodox Christian. I remember that the American Academy of Arts and Sciences wanted to gather as many people as possible to a meeting in Palo Alto, and I said I was not coming, and they wrote somewhat officially, "It's an important meeting, and it's good to come." I wrote back and said, "The day on the Orthodox calendar is Passion Friday, and it's good to be in church." [Laughter]

Lage: And that's not the usual thing in the academic world.

Riasanovsky: No. But I never felt because I was Orthodox that anyone was against me.

I might add that I enjoy that there are more and more Chinese around, because that's how I was brought up in Harbin.

Lage: Does your dual heritage give you a more ironic view of life?
 A little detachment from the scene?

Riasanovsky: I think it does, because many things that seem to be absolutely so I know aren't, because I'm accustomed to where they were not. And I said earlier something that is both related and different to this: I think the most important language to learn--well, your own, of course--but the next most important is your second language because once you know another language well, you have a kind of functional handling of your own language instead of taking it as the absolute law. You realize that things could be said differently. And you can in a good sense manipulate or use, rather than be a slave to one established way.

Lage: In terms of language and maybe thought as well.

Riasanovsky: That's why I say it's related; it's not exactly the same.

Lage: That's interesting.

A Lifelong Interest in Romanticism and Other Continuities

Riasanovsky: [Referring to interview outline] Why a lifelong interest in Romanticism? A famous answer is "Because it's there," but--

Lage: [Laughter] That won't do.

Riasanovsky: I always liked poetry very much. I have a good memory, so I can recite it endlessly. Romanticism, as in my book *The Emergence of Romanticism*, of course is in modern history. It deals with poetry very importantly, although not only poetry. It's in a period that interests me. In this case, because much of my writing was and still is in terms of intellectual periods as a framework, a good question to ask is "How does an intellectual period come about?" I can see various reasons for it.

Lage: You've mentioned that you've never had trouble picking something to work on. Is there a thread that connects your various books?

Riasanovsky: Yes. A kind of recurrent thread--for instance, my first book, my dissertation, was *Russia and the West in the Teaching of the Slavophiles: A Study of Romantic Ideology*.

And my seventh book was *The Emergence of Romanticism*. So the connection is obvious, but you see it's not that it goes necessarily from first to second. There are connections also on a nearer basis. For instance, my second book--you generally write books, I think, when you have questions to answer. You are trying to establish something. And I feel that if you have nothing to offer you shouldn't go into history; there are a great many other fields.

While I was writing on the Slavophiles especially--the term "official nationality" or *ofitsial'naia narodnost'* was used, which referred to the government doctrine in the reign of Nicholas I, 1825-1855. And, quite seriously, I sort of thought this was a clear concept which I couldn't quite grasp. It took me a long time to realize that no one had. Here, you see, that is an historically important doctrine. Again, it wasn't much in philosophy, but it's much in intellectual history, the difference being that philosophy is after eternal truth or logic or esthetics, and intellectual history is about ideas that influence life. And no one had written about it.

Lage: So it was an unanswered question that you uncovered.

Riasanovsky: Yes. And my book [*Nicholas I and Official Nationality in Russia, 1825-1855*] is still the only book on it. But official nationality was close to Slavophilism in some ways. One of my articles is precisely delimiting the two and so on. Here the second book came in that sense out of the first book. At the same time, it was, some would say, a big step forward, but that is a matter of opinion what is forward. But it is an important step because of course the Slavophiles were very interesting and important intellectuals. In fact, much more interesting and important than proponents of official nationality. But official nationality was the government policy for thirty years--in some sense, until 1917. So there I had chapters on official nationality at home, policy in Russia, official nationality abroad, its impact on foreign policy and so on. So there you see the continuity--

Lage: So this was getting into political history also.

Riasanovsky: Certainly. In my book *A Parting of Ways: Government and the Educated Public in Russia, 1801-1855*, I tried to answer this question of why the ways parted and how. As it turned out to be, irrevocably, because they never came together.

So that was a very important problem of government and society. Again, you see, it's the first half of the nineteenth century. My first book on the Slavophiles was on that period, and my second book was on that period, so there was obvious continuity.

Riasanovsky: Now you asked at one point about the influence of various currents and approaches in the writing of history. In some sense, I'm very much an individual; here I remember Hans Rosenberg's statement, and I don't know whether he meant it as condemnation or praise, or rather as a description. I'm a rare example of "people who don't seem to be affected by trends, a person going his own way". And I think that's correct. Again, perhaps my background gives me more choice. But, for example, the book which produced some impression, and on the basis of which I will lecture, for instance, even now in Moscow, is the book on the image of Peter the Great in Russian history and thought. Notice, that is the image and not Peter the Great himself and what he actually did. And no doubt that's a part of the more modern climate in historical writing. There it's sort of like the image of Jefferson, let's say. I read several American books of that kind simply to be better acquainted.

It's very much certainly not political history, but basically intellectual history of the image. And it was difficult for some people to understand because they say, "Well, what do you yourself think about Peter the Great?" Well, it's not what the book is about. Some who would read the book well would say, "Now, next you will write on Peter the Great, will you not?" I would say no. So I would say that's in its own way a major example of being in a new world, although I did not write it because I wanted to follow someone or because I thought that I must do something different.

Lage: Why did you think that was an important question?

Riasanovsky: Because images are very important. That I never doubt. You see, my main field is intellectual history. For instance, my next book may be--if I ever write it--on Russian identity and nationalism, and that is again images.

Lage: Are you working on that?

Riasanovsky: I'm reading, yes.

So those are some aspects of what I do. I'm also again very fortunate that I write on what I please, and I think there is no reason to write on anything else. That doesn't mean the topics are necessarily pleasant, but the topics that interest me. I thought of writing on Nazism, which probably I will not do--partly because time is limited, but also because some good books have now been written. What upset me earlier was precisely that this enormous ideological structure that accounted for Nazism was not sufficiently appreciated. You don't exterminate people for--I would say even for political reasons. Occasionally perhaps in some special struggle, but it has to be itself a central belief. And that was not appreciated, often in strange ways. Now there are better books on that point.

Lage: On Nazism or anti-Semitism?

Riasanovsky: Both. Anti-Semitism is very much a different topic. It is the main line of Nazism. That's why, for instance, I would not put Nazism in the same group with fascism or something that doesn't have it. But at the same time, of course, anti-Semitism goes through a very large area, many historical periods and so on. In itself it's a much bigger subject, but there are better books for both. But what I'm trying to say is in some sense I came close to writing a book on Nazism, and that's certainly a most unpleasant subject.

As you see, there are connections of one book leading to another. I think also, though, that every book is in some way different. After I wrote the book on Nicholas I and official nationality, I thought of writing on the revival of official nationality under Alexander III, 1881-1894. As I said, I believe that in some sense it remained the basic doctrine of the government until 1917. But as I started looking at it, it was the same thing only less interesting, and I gave it up. A student of mine wrote a brilliant doctoral dissertation on the subject from quite a different approach.

Lage: On the later--

Riasanovsky: On Alexander III, yes.

Lage: From a different approach from what you would have taken?

Riasanovsky: Yes, much so. She tried, for instance, to measure such things as, if you will, the democratization or the lowering

of the social status of government personnel using such factors as fluent French and so on. In Nicholas I's time, everyone who amounted to anything spoke fluent French, but it became more rare later on and so on. So it was a very interesting dissertation. I cannot say that I gave it to her; I simply, before that, decided I won't write about it. As I have my books now, they are all different in some important ways.

A History of Russia: The Intellectual Problem of Structuring Russian History

Riasanovsky: The general *History of Russia* is again something else, written originally for my students; I never thought that it would be the most popular history on Russia--I suppose--in the world except for Russia.

Lage: It's been widely translated, hasn't it?

Riasanovsky: Yes. Two different Italian editions, a French one required in university examinations, even a pirated Korean translation.

Lage: I guess that's a form of a compliment.

Riasanovsky: That again [*A History of Russia*] is very much an intellectual problem. The intellectual problem is that of structure. We essentially like to think of history and other things as natural, that's how it was. But of course nothing is natural; it depends on how you put it together. If we did not have some assumptions, I suppose we couldn't separate chairs from people in this room.

Lage: But was your structure a different kind of structure from--

Riasanovsky: It was in the main line of Russian historiography. I mentioned my father was a student of [Vasili Osipovich] Kliuchevsky, who is probably the most prominent Russian historian. But of course there were some differences: if you take Kliuchevsky, for example, obviously he didn't have the Soviet period--he died in 1911--but also he emphasized less sharp breaks than I do.

Lage: Is that a philosophical issue, how sharp are the breaks?

Riasanovsky: Well, it's a real issue; I don't think it's deep philosophy.

Lage: Maybe philosophy's not the right word.

Riasanovsky: Whether, let's say, the change from Republican to Democratic party is a sharp break depends on what you think is important. Also Kliuchevsky starts the sharpest break in modern Russian history, not with Peter the Great, but with the entire seventeenth century. I started it rather later. So, while I certainly did not invent new Russian historiography, I have my own position within it.

Lage: Have other textbooks of this sort followed your structure? Or departed from it?

Riasanovsky: I would say they would probably follow Kliuchevsky, but the point is--as I quoted to you earlier--one charge against Marx in the next world is that he didn't quote Lenin. There are other books; some of them are good. There is an effort, for instance, in one case to have almost no periods--Jesse Clarkson's. Really nothing beyond chapters.

Lage: And the chapters don't have a connection to historical periods?

Riasanovsky: No. Well, suppose you wrote a history of the United States president by president, without further periodizing. It could be done.

There are good historians and histories. [Michael] Florinsky is a good historian, and is of course much older than I am--he is dead now. His father was a prominent Russian historian, who was actually shot by the Bolsheviks. His history precedes mine and is certainly based on Russian sources. He takes a negative view of things, or he says there was almost nothing; I find all sorts of great things.

Lage: Almost nothing of--

Riasanovsky: Of value. I think my method is obviously right because that's how I feel about it, and it is much more successful pedagogically. It's sort of difficult to take a completely negative view of things. His periodization is similar to Kliuchevsky in the main line. Another way in which he is different--and it's a strange way--he likes very much, for whatever reason, to redeem or to restore hopeless characters in Russian history.

Well, that's another history but at least it's a fully valuable history by a man who knows what he is writing about. Some histories written in the West are not.

The Historian Vernadsky

Lage: Are some of the histories in the West as subject to ideology and dogma as the Soviet histories?

Riasanovsky: Well, perhaps they really are more subject to ignorance; you take a few books and write on the basis of it. It's hopeless. A special point of disaster is Vernadsky. He did enormous work but apparently had a very strange mentality. He comes, by the way, from kind of a superintellectual Russian tradition. His father was the great geophysicist; a huge avenue in Moscow was named for his father, Prospekt Vernadskogo; his father was one of the world's great scholars. His grandfather was one of the first important economic historians in Russia. But I don't know where he got this irrepressible desire to speculate, to the point that Yale asked me whether he was a charlatan or not. I told them absolutely not, but I can't explain his mentality.

His field is early Russia; it is a fantastic thing. And it wouldn't be so bad if we had, let's say, fifty good standard historians and one Vernadsky. But at one point we had only one Vernadsky. And those American historians who followed--there are a few--the early period by Vernadsky of course lost immediately; it was a total disaster. It was fantastic. It comes to, let's say, A defeated B in the thirteenth century. That makes little sense; let's say that B defeated A in the twelfth century [laughter].

He knew an enormous amount of history. I think when he was eighty I was asked to come to a celebration in his honor. I couldn't come--Yale is far; I was here. They said at least write something, send a telegram. Well, I sent a telegram; the telegram said, "In all my life in history I have yet to deal with a topic where I didn't have to read something by Vernadsky." Which was true and appropriate. And some of it is good. Individual articles can be excellent. It's sort of a range from basic and entirely reliable material to completely wild fantasy from a person who had the best training and comes from the best background. That's why I say I cannot explain it.

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Riasanovsky: I suppose part of the problem--but it doesn't really explain it--is that when people don't know something, they usually say, There are these two bits of evidence, and they don't make much sense. Vernadsky would produce three theories on their basis.

Lage: Too much theorizing perhaps.

Riasanovsky: Perhaps he should have gone into creative literature.

Lage: Is there more to say about *History of Russia*? It seems to have been so widely used and influential.

Riasanovsky: Surely for our students, yes. I have no figures, but perhaps eighty percent of them studied my Russian history.

Lage: That must be gratifying.

Riasanovsky: Very. I must say though--it happens all the time: Someone says, "I love your book." I always ask, "Which book?" And it's not pretension; that's my natural answer. And most people are completely upset by that kind of answer--am I talking to the wrong person?

Lage: Well, it seems like a natural thing to say. After all, when you've written as many books as you have.

Treatment of the Soviet Period--A Prophet?

Riasanovsky: Sure. Well, my treatment of the Soviet period was always anti-Soviet to the point that I tried to make it more pro-Soviet with every edition. In other words, I would consider perhaps I'm unfair; let me again examine the approaches. Well, I examine them, and I become more anti-Soviet. There are several things. I suppose the most important is the enormous cruelty of it. But also I didn't share the ideology, the society was absurd. I cannot say that I predicted its fall, although there were one or two efforts to make me into a prophet, including by my French publishers.

Lage: Based on the *History of Russia*?

Riasanovsky: Yes. I finished *History of Russia* saying that I totally disbelieve in any new Soviet man, new Soviet solution. As to revolutions, it's better not to talk about revolutions until there is some evidence. Evolution, but then evolution is very difficult and is something that's already perhaps reached its limit, because the party wouldn't give up its hold on the country. ["To conclude, the Soviet system is not likely to last, not likely to change fundamentally by evolution, and not likely to be overthrown by a revolution."] And the last sentence is: "History, to be sure, has a way of advancing even when that means leaving historians behind." And one of my English reviewers wrote a very favorable review in general, but he said, "Unfortunately, after 711 lucid pages, Professor Riasanovsky ends with a murky sentence." Well, I stayed with my murky sentence.

Lage: [Laughter] Was that sentence in the original first edition?

Riasanovsky: Yes. It stayed there at the end until the last edition when it came into the introduction. But I stayed with my murky sentence, and as I say, tried to check the validity of my estimate--for instance, I would think that perhaps I'm too American; I want things to happen, I want things to change. Perhaps Russians are settled with what they have. Well, usually seven days in the Soviet Union was enough to decide that they haven't settled. Then it collapsed, and my French publisher says that it's exactly what happened: no revolution, no evolution, and at the same time the system collapsed. So you see, I'm a great prophet of it.

Lage: Did you really expect that--

Riasanovsky: No, I didn't expect it. Well, I expected it in one sense. I mean, as I looked at it, I could not consider it eternal.

Lage: Nothing is.

Riasanovsky: Yes, but this more than others. I think, for instance, Oxford has a way of being eternal. There are some other places. But not the Soviet system. And again about revolution, there was no evidence, and it's bad history to invent your own evidence. Evolution, it's again very hard to see it; of course, it did not work. In that sense, my book was better than some. I mean, I consider it my triumph that I didn't have to rewrite any of my history after the Soviet Union collapsed.

Thoughts on the Collapse of the USSR, and Gorbachev

Riasanovsky: Of course, now change has happened; we have more evidence, as I say, with rather bitter humor--I suppose some students take it straight--only little changes. For instance, the former figure for dead in the Second World War was 20 million; now it's 27 million. A little change of 7 million, you see. But still, it doesn't take much rewriting; you put twenty-seven instead of twenty.

I did not predict it, and in general--while I am very happy not to have to rewrite anything--I was surprised by what happened and how it happened. Although again, I never thought that Gorbachev was the savior and the stopping place; the system had to go. Now it has, and I think forever. Things can be very bad, but the old system cannot return.

. There were virtually no prophets, that's very interesting. There's one group that was, in a sense, and that is a certain kind of free market economists, beginning with perhaps von Mises, who I think predicted in 1931--I did not check--Grossman tells me. But it was a purely theoretical prediction that this economy cannot work, and eventually it will collapse. There were, of course, also Russian White officers who kept saying they're criminals, and the people will get rid of them. It's a sad commentary that these officers, drunk or otherwise, were more correct than our social scientists [laughter].

But except for that, you see, it's true that it was missed.

Lage: Now Ronald Reagan likes to take credit for--not necessarily predicting, but almost causing, the collapse.

Riasanovsky: I sympathize with him.

Lage: Do you think the U.S. government policy--

Riasanovsky: It's part of it, but probably so. I was always more in favor of hard policy--although of course completely short of preventive war or something like that--than the other extreme. We made mistakes in the Cold War, etcetera, but I think there is every evidence that the hardness was on their part much more than on ours. And I even somewhat sympathize

with the view that it was Star Wars [Strategic Defense Initiative] that finished the Soviet Union off.

Lage: That it put a drain on their economy?

Riasanovsky: There's a good book denouncing that approach, a very detailed book of several hundred pages. If I agree with it in part, I would say that of course it is part of a more complex picture. Our defense measures and so on certainly precede Reagan.

Lage: But nevertheless the defense measures were important?

Riasanovsky: Yes, they could have been. Recently again I read by an able person a speculation--it's also dangerous to speculate in history what would have happened if what happened didn't happen--that if [Yuri] Andropov [1982-1984] had lived, we would still have the Soviet Union today. It's not impossible. One thing about Gorbachev, he's not a fool but he behaved like one in the sense that he had absolutely no grasp of what was happening.

Lage: He seems to have such a good image in this country in general.

Riasanovsky: Well, he caused the new Russia in the sense, you could say, that Louis XVI caused the French Revolution. Important, of course, but I also said that he got a Nobel Prize--I'd give him two Nobel Prizes--just for not being on Iraq's side in the [Persian] Gulf War. Otherwise I probably wouldn't be talking to you now. So I'm not against giving him anything, although not the Presidio [in San Francisco, where a planned Gorbachev Institute might be located].

He absolutely didn't understand what was happening. He really thought that he can reward good people, punish some corruption, speed up production, and that will be it. Or such gestures as going to Riga [Latvia], and then talking to people so they wouldn't separate [chuckle].

Lage: It seems that with his being in the middle of it like that I wouldn't expect a great understanding.

Riasanovsky: No, you're quite right, and again it's a comment on this fantastic isolation. For instance, if you think of the original communist leaders in the revolution whether it's Lenin or [Leon] Trotsky, they knew the world. They of course looked at it in their own way, but they weren't

isolated. As I said, one sentence--I don't remember the exact words but I remember the meaning--in Gorbachev's book, *Perestroika*, which I would submit for the most wrong statement in the twentieth century, and you know the competition would be high--was that one clear evidence of the superiority of our socialist system is that we have overcome the nationalities problem. And I suppose that's what his teachers said, and that's what he believed. But that's what I mean that he was really out of it.

Lage: Interesting. Do you think this is a good place to stop?

Riasanovsky: Yes. Gorbachev threatens to come back, but I don't think he'll make it, so we can talk about other things.

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More Continuities: Childhood Interest in Utopian Socialism and The Teaching of Charles Fourier

[Interview 9: April 3, 1996]

Lage: Today is April 3, 1996; this is session nine. Last time, we talked some about your interests, your studies, your History of Russia, and I thought we should continue along that line.

Riasanovsky: As I said before--it's probably the first interview--I learned to read very early. I think I read three languages by [the age of] five or six, the three being French, Russian, and English in that order. And these are the languages I can dream in or think in.

Lage: Depending on what country you're in.

Riasanovsky: Yes. Well, what I hear around me, I guess. And there [pointing to his bookshelf] is the enormous encyclopedia that I read as a child. That was left in China, but a student of mine bought a set for me in Russia. That was my very favorite reading.

Lage: When you were a child?

Riasanovsky: Yes. In that favorite reading I was especially interested in Christian heresies and in various intellectual social trends.

Lage: Now how old were you that we're talking about?

Riasanovsky: Very early, but I'm not certain.

Lage: Like pre-teens?

Riasanovsky: Oh, yes, certainly.

Lage: Those interests seem precocious.

Riasanovsky: Yes, they are. I remember one professor--at least it's our family tradition--saying, "Who is this seven-year-old boy who talks about the Tudors and the Stuarts?"

He was a very distinguished professor who perished in the purges because he returned to Russia.

Lage: Oh, he made the mistake of returning?

Riasanovsky: Yes.

Lage: So history fascinated you from the beginning.

Riasanovsky: Yes, history, but also, you see, if you talk about heresies, if you talk about utopian socialism, this can also be philosophy, this can also be intellectual history, this can be even other things--for instance, the psychological element is very prominent in Fourier. And this kind of interest just occurred; it's not unrelated to my parents, but neither is it straight in that line: Father was a famous legal scholar and his first book was on the history of Russian law of inheritance, which is some distance from it. Mother was a writer.

Lage: I wonder what it was about utopian socialism that attracted you?

Riasanovsky: The structure of it. I'm always interested in structures. You see, what they tried to do was create a perfect society. I was never a follower of any of it, even from the start, but I just found interesting how they wanted to do it. And by the way, on this utopian socialism, I eventually in 1969 published a book on Fourier.

Lage: And what approach did you take for that?

Riasanovsky: To present what Fourier really meant. He was much too often interpreted as a different kind of Marx, a precursor of this or that. Well, first I wanted to reestablish what he meant in his own right, and second, to take him at his word. I

suppose he was mad or obsessed, but he meant what he said. And so many of the views are so fantastic that people wouldn't believe it: they think it's sarcasm or simply a spoof or whatever. There were no spoofs in Fourier. The latest and the most major book on Fourier is by [Jonathan] Beecher [professor of history] of Santa Cruz. Beecher was my student at one time. Beecher reads Fourier about ninety percent straight; I read him one hundred percent straight.

Lage: Did you look at Fourier as a person, and his psychological makeup, or just his thought?

Riasanovsky: The title of the book is *The Teaching of Charles Fourier*. And of course I had to talk about him too. Well, anyhow, when I was working on this, people said that I wanted to live in Paris, and therefore I was writing a book on French history instead of Russian. Which upset me greatly, because of course I had wanted to write on Fourier from the age of five.

Lage: Who made remarks like that?

Riasanovsky: Some friends. It's not an unknown practice. One of my colleagues--not here, in Iowa--got a big grant to write why there was no McCarthyism in Iowa. And went to Paris [laughter].

Lage: Well, that's a good choice of venue for that topic.

Riasanovsky: Yes. He was a sociologist.

So the interests are very consistent.

Lage: Do you think that what was going on in the Soviet Union when you were a child has some effect on this interest in utopian socialism?

Riasanovsky: Perhaps so, although intellectual problems precede the Soviet Union. Of course, I was not in the Soviet Union as a child--

Lage: I know, but there must have been a lot of talk about--

Riasanovsky: Perhaps so. Another way to put why I wanted to write a book on Fourier, which I finally wrote, is that of course Fourier is important enough to be included in all kinds of intellectual histories, histories of socialism, and I felt

time and again that I can tell better what he meant. So I finally did.

Intellectual History: "Another One of Those American Nonsense"

Riasanovsky: This kind of interest--my doctoral dissertation, my first book, was on the Slavophiles, who were a very important Russian romantic intellectual movement of the first half of the nineteenth century.

Lage: So this was Romanticism also?

Riasanovsky: Partly Romanticism, but a brilliant part. I think about as logical a romantic movement as there was. As typical of romantic movements its one weakness was that it didn't correspond to any kind of reality, but that's something else.

Actually, a dangerous moment on this for me was that at Oxford you write the dissertation--I was excused from the examinations--and then you have to defend it to two people who are your opponents. You have to wear robes, and it's open to the public. The public means people who have academic robes. That includes students; they also wear short ones. And you have two examiners, and the two examiners were now-Lord [Max] Beloff and [Sergei] Konovalov. Recently Lord Beloff was objecting very much to an American historian writing, I noticed, negatively on the British Empire, entirely negatively. But the name is Russian, and he obviously knew Russian, I would say natively. There's also a rule that the examiners are not to be at all the people with whom you worked. In a sense, the opposite of our system where it's always your professor and so on. Konovalov I knew personally, I met him in Oxford. He was the son of a minister of the provisional government, and I met him a number of times but I was not his student. Beloff, I knew of him, but I didn't know him at all.

So Beloff began by saying, "Mr. Riasanovsky, I read your dissertation with great interest. Now tell me why in the world is it history? Is it not philosophy?" And I said, "Sir, I come here from Harvard in the field of intellectual history." And Beloff said, "Another one of those American nonsenses." [Laughter]

Lage: You had quite a defense then.

Riasanovsky: From then on, he was friendly. We discussed the subject. I had no difficulty.

Lage: Now what was his field?

Riasanovsky: At the time he had excellent books on Soviet foreign policy, but it's a broad field. It's also in political theory and the history of ideas and so on. I suppose one reason why he was a reader was that he obviously knew Russian.

Lage: Was intellectual history then a new field that grew up in America?

Riasanovsky: It's a matter partly of classification. For instance, in my book on Fourier, I had to deal more with literary historians in France than with intellectual historians, because this was broadly in literature and letters. So it's partly a matter of classification.

By the way, the other examiner, Konovalov, was very much on my side and very nice, but he kept pleading, "Why do you discuss them only as romantics? Wasn't there something originally Russian there?" And I would again explain, "No, not what you propose." So it turned out to be a nice examination. I simply mentioned that the kind of interest I have in that sense is somewhat borderline, sort of in a special classification.

If I had not taken history as my main field, I would probably take philosophy. Other possibilities would be literature or literatures. I love French literature, I love Russian literature, I love English literature. So this kind of intellectual interest I never found necessary to defend. And it's of course completely more than acceptable in our family. If someone says, "Why are you interested in literature, or philosophy, or intellectual history, or whatever?" And I still have that feeling--that feeling being that it is a wonderful field or fields, and people should not go into the field unless they love it. At least on this earth, you see, there is only one life--I already told you my inclination to Buddhism for its many human lives--and you may just use it well and do what you want.

The Value of Literature

Riasanovsky: I'm afraid, by the way, this is becoming simply a series of anecdotes, but anecdotes often tell a lot. There was a Professor [Irving] Putter at the University of California in Romance Languages. He was generally hated by students, and the *Daily Cal* once listed him as the worst professor the previous year. He wrote back and said he was away all year [laughter]. How could he be the worst professor?

And Putter was a scholar of French literature. He had books on [Charles Marie] Leconte de Lisle, the poet, and I came to know him reasonably well because we were both working at the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris. And once a week or even more often, we would have coffee together. His complaint was that literature is a dead end, there is nothing to be done; of course, he continued working in it and working well. But the tone was always down and out, and at that point I was offered a chair at Yale. So I flew to Yale for several days, decided to stay at Cal.

But at the end of this interesting, in some ways difficult, week or five days or however long I stayed in New Haven, I was talking to Victor Erlich in the Department of Literature. Victor Erlich is a very gifted, now retired, professor of Russian and comparative literature. His father was the famous labor leader whom the Soviets shot first as they came to Poland. In any case, I was all ready to fly back but I had several hours with him. I just got through another talk with the president of Yale who said he'll be praying that I accept the job, and I don't know to this day why it shook me negatively and very strongly, for I believe in prayer [laughter], but--he's the man who later became our ambassador to Great Britain.

And here Erlich and I talked about [Nikolai] Gogol--both of us were brought up on Gogol. It was an excellent morning and lunch, and then he told me a story which I think now is published in one of his works. But in any case, he also grew up knowing several languages. His mother was Russian, his father was Polish, and, again, he began reading very early. And he was given for his birthday or New Year's or whatever a collection of Gogol's stories. And then he proceeded to pretend that he was asleep, get up at night, and start copying them. And that went on for a long time until they discovered him. His parents said, "What are you doing?" He said, "What if something happens and the book

disappears?" That Jewish community in Poland was later entirely destroyed by the Nazis. So, you see, Victor Erlich never asked whether it was worth doing literature. It's a story that I'll remember forever. The community disappeared, the book disappears, but there's a copy left.

Well, that is enough on my orientation.

Summing Up and Work in Progress ##

Lage: Let's finish talking about your books.

Riasanovsky: Well, to repeat, the first book was on the Slavophiles, which is intellectual history of a major group. The next book was on official nationality, which was government doctrine--less brilliant by far as a doctrine, but ruling Russia for thirty years. A good example of a combination of political and intellectual history. Then came my *History of Russia*, then came the Fourier book--and I don't need to say more. As I said, there are questions one asks; that's why one writes books. The question with Fourier was, What exactly did he say and what did he mean? The question with official nationality was, What was official nationality? I told you that I had this strange feeling that everyone else knew it but I didn't. Then I realized no one knew it. The next book was *A Parting of Ways: Government and the Educated Public in Russia, 1801-1855*, and there the issue was how did government and educated public--or at least an important part of it--separate?

Lage: How did you get interested in that?

Riasanovsky: Completely out of the others, you could say, because separation was in my opinion the first half of the nineteenth century. I already had two books on the first half of the nineteenth century. It also went completely against the dominant literature on the subject because the dominant literature was Soviet, and it more or less presented heroic liberals and radicals opposing the governments throughout the eighteenth century. My point is that they were completely part of the educated group. A more useful view would be that here you have a small number of educated people in this enormous peasant mass trying to make their way in some manner.

In other words, you have the closest not only cooperation but almost identity of the educated public and the government until the first half of the nineteenth century. The educated public of course was created by the government by Peter the Great's reforms, later Catherine the Great. But then there was separation; that's what the book is about, the separation. So you see it again combines various interests.

Then *The Image of Peter the Great in Russian History and Thought*--well, that's the image of Peter the Great. As Rosenberg said, I go my own way, but you can say that of course reflects the times because it was the image and not the reign of Peter the Great.

Lage: So it reflects kind of the historical questions being asked at that time.

Riasanovsky: Yes. And also the importance of the image, obviously. If you think only obvious cold facts matter, don't write a book like that. It's also a remarkable summary of Russian intellectual history over that period because of the importance.

And then the last book was--again in some sense returning to my basic interests or continuing them--on the emergence of Romanticism. Fourier, of course, is intellectual history, but if you want to go by countries, it's France. The emergence of Romanticism is intellectual history, and the two countries that matter are England and Germany, and here I am.

Now, on the question of Russian identity and nationalism, it's a very difficult and enormous topic, but I already told you how when I mentioned it to Berlin, his immediate reaction--he always speaks fast--was, "But you've already written this book." Well, I haven't, but to some extent it's part of the issue of the Slavophiles and official nationality, and of very much else in my writing.

Lage: You mean the book that now you're working on, on nationalism?

Riasanovsky: Yes. So you see the continuity is very strong.

Lage: And it's connected to Romanticism?

Riasanovsky: Part of it is. In the Romantic period, surely Romanticism is connected, and in some sense it's still with us. And it's certainly connected to the Slavophiles, it's connected to official nationality, it's certainly connected with the issue of the intelligentsia and separation from the government. At the same time, it's quite a separate issue, and anything I have in a former book would be only part of the story. I suppose if I'm tired or perhaps even if I'm not tired, parts of it I can rewrite from my former books, but so much else remains. And the early part is very difficult.

Lage: So what stage are you at with it?

Riasanovsky: I'm reading books. I'm thinking about it.

Lage: You read and think and take notes and wait for the structure to come while you're shaving? [Laughter]

Riasanovsky: Yes. I take notes or at least notes of pages I may want to use. At the moment I don't have any particularly splendid structure of it. So in that sense I'm not ready to write, and the second point is that it is very difficult because, for example, if you include as I want to include--at least in the first chapter--the pre-Petrine period, it's simply enormous literature. I could read endlessly. But that's also one way--auxiliary, but very helpful to me--when you have a new book, it gives you a chance to read a lot of books you don't get to read otherwise. And I insist that history is a cumulative field, so you can add something more and valuable to what you already have. So I'm reading with interest many books. In the meantime, I got a letter from a doctoral candidate saying that he heard I was writing on Russian nationalism and asking, Will anything be left to him? I said yes.

To give a longer answer to that, first I said yes, and of course I may never even write my book. Second, he was especially interested in Illin and Russian thinking in the twentieth century. I said I didn't know if I'll ever reach him or include him, so please write all you can.

Lage: That's an interesting point of view he had. Such a huge topic to think that you would completely exhaust it.

Riasanovsky: You're completely correct. But that's one of the less pleasant aspects sometimes in our field. At the time I was in Finland working on Nicholas I, and there was Theo von

Laue who you know was my only tovarishch [comrade], and there were graduates--he was already professor or assistant professor, I don't know. Then there were a few very able graduate students: Arthur Mendel, whose obituary I wrote not so long ago, later professor at Michigan; and several other people, Anatole Mazour of Stanford, who was much the senior of us. So there was a group, and I said, "Let's meet once every two weeks or whatever and discuss our research." Only Von Laue agreed. Everyone else was sort of hiding his research. One person, whom I generally like very much--I don't like the statement, said--I already had my book on the Slavophiles published--"You are already an established scholar. All I have is this research. I just have to protect it."

Writing ##

Lage: One of the questions that we haven't covered is your method of writing. It's something that your colleagues have commented on, with great admiration, so I want to ask you about how you write.

Riasanovsky: In one sense, very traditionally, in that I read and take notes. I also very much like to read books and not chapters or pages from books. Obviously everyone has to read sometimes chapters and pages, but you remember Berlin's criticism: "Strange people, these American students. They ask you not only what books to read, but which chapters and believe it or not, which pages." There is more defense for my approach in intellectual history than in probably any other field because books often are units. If I for example were checking on the prices in Genoa, I would try to get them wherever I can and not read whole books on prices.

I suppose what's commented on mostly by my colleagues is that I do remember very much; I rely very much on my memory. I'm lucky I have a good memory, and the books--I have perhaps an exaggerated impression--I remember every book I ever read. That doesn't mean I remember everything about it and so on. But I don't understand people when they say, "Oh, have I read that book? I can't remember."

Lage: You are extremely fortunate.

Riasanovsky: Yes. It's not a photographic memory; it's not that I remember every word, although I do tend to remember words on a page, whether it's on the second line or not. But not perfectly at all. Still, for example, I remember early in the Second World War, I was helping some friends on the farm, and that was a situation where I would read the paper in the morning, work for the day picking apples or whatever, and in the evening I could recite the paper. Not remember, but recite. So that is what surprises many people. It can be dangerous; I had one or two students who tried to imitate it. In one case I remember, a woman tried and fainted [laughter].

Lage: How did that happen?

Riasanovsky: Quite literally. She was determined to lecture without notes and literally fainted. But see, that's why I emphasize that everyone has his own style. It's not important whether you use notes or don't use notes.

But I don't think that I have anything special; by the way, I have met very many historians with fine memories. I don't think I met a first-rate historian who doesn't have a good memory. Obviously, memory is not enough. I mean, you could be reciting the railroad schedule by heart; that's still not history. But in the historical field it's extremely important.

And the style of writing is that I write using an old typewriter--it's old by now; I got it when I went to Oxford. My first book, *The Slavophiles*, was written on this typewriter, and so far all my books were written on this typewriter.

Lage: This one up here in the box? [Laughter]

Riasanovsky: Yes.

Lage: Which doesn't seem to have a cord coming from it.

Riasanovsky: No, it has no cords. It is not electric.

Lage: And it's not a computer.

Riasanovsky: No. So I think once it breaks down that will be the end of my writing.

Lage: So even your 1992 book--

Riasanovsky: Yes. Even the review I just mentioned which I wrote the day before yesterday. So in that sense it's simple.

By the time I type, I usually have it completely clearly in my head, so I type almost to my own dictation. The interesting result of that is that the first version is always the final version.

Lage: It's almost too much to imagine, for me. You mentioned to me early on how the structure of your potential book comes to you, sometimes while shaving.

Riasanovsky: That's earlier.

Lage: And then what happens after that?

Riasanovsky: When I have the structure, there's still the book to write. So I read or think of what I'm going to do, and I usually have it very clearly in my mind, then I type it on my typewriter.

Lage: And is this a chapter at a time, or how much?

Riasanovsky: Oh, no, at a time it would be only a page or two. I have the structure of the entire book in mind, and from then on I proceed. Several things perhaps could be said: so far I've always written my books from beginning to end. I'm saying that because there are people who start with chapter five, and there are other more difficult combinations. I'm not saying this has to be so, but that's how it has been. When I say from beginning to end, this does not, of course, include acknowledgements or introduction or something. The only serious changes are if there is some new material, or I omitted considering something, and decided to consider it-- basically it is first written in my head and then on the typewriter. By the way, I'm not the fastest writer, and I type sufficiently for my purposes; I'm not a good typist, either.

But the point is that I'm not implying that I can produce books immediately, because the important point is the earlier point when first of all you have to have what you want to write about; you have to have what you want to say. Then you think through these pages before you write them.

Lage: But you're not sitting down and writing the entire book or chapter at a time. You might just develop a few pages and then--

Riasanovsky: Yes, but I always know where the pages belong and what will follow. But as far as having in my mind, no, it's what I intend to type today.

Lage: So you'll do some editing and reworking in your mind.

Riasanovsky: Yes. But the interesting result of it, which I learned in sort of a comic way earlier, is that the first draft therefore is the final draft. And when I began writing, let's say, an article, I would plan to write it in January, and in February I'd write the second version, and in March I'd write the third version, and then I'd send it in. Nothing happened in February or March.

Lage: Because you were satisfied with it.

Riasanovsky: And everything was always accepted. So then I finally realized that that's the way it is. It doesn't depend on how big the book is, because I think the first edition of my *History of Russia* was 711 pages--there, I thought, I'll have to follow a different technique. I didn't. That was structured before I started, and in some sense better structured perhaps than other books because I had a hundred or so people whom I read who did the same structuring of Russian history. But nevertheless, the process was the same. Again, I do not consider it good or bad because the important thing is the end product. I know people who are completely-- to my mind--confused and sloppy writers and end up with excellent books.

Lage: Because they do draft after draft?

Riasanovsky: They rewrite, they overwrite enormously, so editors have to-- In my case, the editors have very little to do. But as I say, the important point is the final product. So also, it is not the same as poetry or really artistic writing, but it is a creative process, and every person therefore has his or her own style. We mentioned graduate students and teaching graduates. What I try to tell and advise is that everyone has his own style and should try to improve his own way of doing it. It's not necessarily easy either, for one thing, to be honest with yourself; for example, not to say, well, I know it's sloppy, but that'll be taken care of later; you should account for what you're doing. But who am I to say

you should need three drafts when I never produce them myself? And that really is so.

The earlier point, when you suddenly have the structure of the book, I discovered many people have at some point--often later than I, often after they've been working and writing and rewriting. Occasionally they don't seem to ever have the structure. When I speak of books, I do not distinguish between dissertations and books in terms of quality. In any case, at least a few books are somehow written by a person not quite knowing to the end how it will turn out.

Lage: You mean the book shows that they didn't know, or in the process they find--

Riasanovsky: No, the person himself does not realize a clear structure and still writes an acceptable book. But that is rare. Usually, the kind of process which with me happens always before I start writing for the entire book either also happens with others before they start writing--I'm not unique at all--or in the process of writing it happens usually quite early.

Lage: They then see where they're going.

Riasanovsky: Then the point, of course, is to write--so here again people differ--and I'm afraid standards have declined. We have now, even with our extremely high selectivity, perhaps ten or fifteen percent of graduate students who write very sloppily because they never learned to write English anyplace. Still, I would say ten or fifteen percent leaves eighty-five who write better. But the point is we did not have such people twenty years ago.

Lage: Do you work on their writing skills?

Riasanovsky: I always do in the sense that what I get, I correct everything. Partly because I've been editor of *California Slavic Studies* for forty years or whatever, and you cannot correct enough. It's tedious or pedantic, if you will, but it's always helpful. So of course I do.

Lage: Do you correct sloppy language?

Riasanovsky: Of course. I remember recently in a doctoral dissertation, you had something like, "two phenomenon." And that's precisely the type of mistakes that didn't used to happen. I have even lately stopped saying something like, "Show me what

you've done, just a draft; it doesn't have to be final," because occasionally I have got illiterate material at that point--just a draft.

Lage: And the excuse is it's just a draft.

Riasanovsky: Very often they don't even realize it. It's apparently possible to go through our schools and never learn English.

Lage: Is it possible to get a Ph.D. still being in that state?

Riasanovsky: Not in our department. You have to rewrite and rewrite and I suppose they can turn to their friends or whatever. No, I will not accept such miserable writing and most of my colleagues will not. There are problems, for example, from one colleague saying, "You cannot criticize spelling; I cannot spell."

Lage: [laughter] But if they have a computer they can always use spell-check.

Riasanovsky: Yes, exactly. Computers confuse things. I never use them, but it's interesting in terms of scholarship, because the idea of drafts disappears. I had my teaching life in terms of drafts--first, second, third--now it's even impossible to tell. If Tolstoy for example, who had many drafts, had a word processor--?

Contributions of Colleagues to Works-in-Progress

##

Lage: How much do you discuss your work-in-progress with your colleagues?

Riasanovsky: I discuss it considerably, but you can look at the acknowledgements in my book. Quite a few colleagues read every manuscript. A somewhat different group for *Emergence of Romanticism* and *Parting of Ways*, but I discuss it and profit greatly from that arrangement.

Lage: Is this after you've written the draft, or while you're reading?

Riasanovsky: While reading I may discuss problems, but essentially they read the draft. And as I told you the draft is always the last one as well as the first. But it's very interesting.

Lage: Do you give it to people outside the field of Russian history?

Riasanovsky: Yes. For instance, two of the readers now are [Robert L.] Middlekauff, who is in American history, and [Frederic E., Jr.] Wakeman, who is in Chinese history.

Lage: Now why do you pick them?

Riasanovsky: Well, Wakeman for an interesting reason. I was looking at 103s, a list of them, and lo and behold, Fred Wakeman is giving a 103 on Fourier. That's how we became well acquainted. He is a graduate of Lycée Henri IV in Paris, and he is interested in the topic.

Middlekauff, I think our main interest is in writing on historians and about historians. Of course, we exchange. I read Wakeman's remarkable manuscripts generally with absolute praise. I remember one case that was not quite absolute because I said that it was excellent but only Benjamin Schwarz will be able to read it--that's his teacher at Harvard. One thing he did in that particular manuscript--I must say that once I read them and give my suggestions and discuss them, I rarely reread the published versions, so I don't know how my suggestions are used. But one thing he did in that particular manuscript was quote from Mao Zedong and from Rousseau, without identifying them, assuming that everyone knows the material. Well, probably in his Lycée, everyone did, at least Rousseau [laughter].

Lage: But that would be the kind of remark to give him a little perspective.

Riasanovsky: It has to be rewritten on a lower level; otherwise it's sort of a closet discussion with people who are both specialists in Chinese intellectual history and completely in European intellectual history.

Lage: But that would require rewriting your book. That would be a hard criticism to take.

Riasanovsky: Well, it could be improved even if you give reference. But the point is that he has been also very helpful.

Lage: What kind of comments will you get from people like Middlekauff and Wakeman?

Riasanovsky: For instance, one comment I got--this time from Wakeman. Wakeman's father is a well-known writer. He himself writes beautiful English. He apparently is fluent in Chinese; he's obviously fluent in French, but he doesn't have quite my problem of which language--his language is English. For example, I asked him to look at--I suppose he read--three different translations of Pushkin's *Bronze Horseman* in English, and state which he prefers. I also asked my wife to do that. And give the reasons.

But I remember that once I was reading his huge manuscript on the Ming dynasty. I think it came out in two volumes. And it suddenly became clearer than ever; I always believed in it, but suddenly it became clearer than ever: what an abstract and rationally determined and unnatural construct human societies are. You see, that's what gives such enormous power to ideas, for one thing--there is no natural way to construct life. And here you see in this Chinese society--with the problems of overpopulation, the floods, the need to control--an extremely elaborate system of behavior, relationships, and so on. And completely as if you're building it with blocks. I even thought, Why did it suddenly become so much clearer than I ever had it before? Then I realized: it becomes clearer the less you know about the society. We assume our things are as they should be--two parties, whatever. In Russian history, and I've studied it since childhood, I'm also in it, and when you take a completely different society, it becomes stark clear.

Lage: But on the other hand, you might miss the sort of organic things that are native to that society.

Riasanovsky: Sure. But you see, the only point is to what extent is this a construction? This, I think, is a very serious contribution that Wakeman made. I told him so.

Lage: It seems to fit your own point of view.

Riasanovsky: Exactly. But I never had that point of view that clear.

Lage: And Middlekauff? Do you read his works?

Riasanovsky: Yes, and they're good. With Middlekauff I occasionally can help with minor things. For instance, he says in Western scholarship; I said no, say American scholarship, French

scholarship, etcetera. And also, he is of course a wonderful person and a very balanced person. He has some of this Anglo-American centrism, which I don't have. As Kerner said, "It's better that Anglo-Saxons teach Russian history," but his advice failed. So I can help in some minor ways.

Lage: And then what would he contribute to your--

Riasanovsky: He can always contribute English. Sometimes I disagree with comments. I don't know what I did with his one comment that I especially disagree with--it was the emergence of romanticism; I could look it up, but it's hardly worth it--I had written something about how it goes sort of every way, and it's not surprising that one book is called *The End of Romanticism* and the other *The Eternal Continuity of Romanticism*: take your choice. That's what I wrote, and he said, "Nick, this sentence is not worthy of you. You must explain, you must take sides." [Laughter] I think I finally refused.

Lage: You refused to take sides?

Riasanovsky: Yes. It was an interesting discussion.

The Art and Practice of Book Reviewing

Lage: You write an amazing number of book reviews. Can you talk a little about how you approach writing reviews? And how reviewing so many books might contribute to your work?

Riasanovsky: Yes. For instance, I just sent off one more review; that will be 165 reviews sent. Several things there: I am, I suppose, relatively well-organized, and that's very important because reviews always have deadlines. There are excellent people in the profession who review less or who review and delay.

Lage: They don't get asked as often, I would guess.

Riasanovsky: A brilliant--in terms of comic sense--colleague of mine in Russian literature at Illinois, once after he was badgered and badgered wrote a review praising the book, but denouncing people who sent him letters [laughter].

Lage: In a review?

Riasanovsky: Yes, which became a classic [chuckles]. But that reaction is rare; almost unique. I think of it a little because I agreed to speak of the development of the Russian field in California, at the next meeting next autumn at the American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies. There will be a person speaking about Harvard, and Maurice Friedberg will be speaking about Columbia, and no doubt he'll be the brilliant center of it.

Lage: And you're going to speak about Slavic studies at the University of California?

Riasanovsky: Yes. I think it is correct that they are the three most important schools.

So I'm relatively reliable, and that's extremely important, extremely cherished. Secondly, I have the *History of Russia* and so on; it's a very broad range. I turn down some books for review on the ground that I'm not competent.

Lage: In what areas might those be?

Riasanovsky: Could be Russian music or something of that sort. You see, after all these many years, I don't remember every time. What I'm trying to say is I do not simply review every book given to me. Nevertheless, because of my *History of Russia*, I'm qualified enough to review many books. I had the invaluable help of my father until he died in 1968.

Also at least when I began--it's much less so now--there weren't that many people who could review Russian material. And I repeat I do like books, I do like to read books completely, I consider them in terms of presentation as well as in terms of argument and so on, so that I am an easy target for reviews.

Lage: It lets you do what you like to do.

Riasanovsky: Yes. There's always a word limitation, but I must say I like word limitations too. I think that, at least for the purpose of reviews, unless there is very special reason, there is no need to go on endlessly. And usually, in most periodicals, if you think that for some reason you need more space you can get it. Also I said--which is I suppose both a strong and a weak point--I tend to be eclectic; I like very many things, including things that are not my own, so this is a very broad span.

I should add that I can review and have reviewed books in several languages. For instance, I get quite a few German books; people generally should and do read German, but apparently some don't. I even had one very able person who never learned it; I said, "Hadn't you better learn it?" And he said, "It is not cost-effective." [Laughter]

Lage: Now what if you get a book that you really think is disreputable? How do you deal with that?

Riasanovsky: There are several things. One thing you can always do--sometimes the editors suggest it, other times you act on your own, namely you don't review it. Sometimes the editors say, "If the book is worth reviewing."

Lage: I see; they give you that out.

Riasanovsky: Yes. If they don't say so, you can still say the book is bad, I don't want to do anything with it. That's one possibility.

Another possibility, of course, is to review it for what it's worth. Because a book may have something worth pointing out even if it's a bad book. In addition, the book may be of some pretentious influence in the field--there's something again about the Russian soul, or Russian strangeness--but I think it's extremely important to be honest about it.

Lage: Since you have such a wide circle of acquaintances that must complicate matters.

Riasanovsky: That comes down to one example I was going to give you. Adam Ulam is one of the very able people in the field. He has his problems; one problem is that I don't know whether he published thirty or thirty-seven books or whatever, because they are more or less the same, overlap--it's impossible to classify what he published. But it includes very interesting good books. I remember *The Unfinished Revolution: Marxism and Communism in the Modern World*. I almost never assign books that everyone must read, but Martin Malia assigned them for everyone in his class; and I put it as very highly recommended.

He has a very idiosyncratic--he is always idiosyncratic --book on Stalin, but at the same time it is a very able book on Stalin. As usual, he does things he shouldn't do. For example, in that book there's an inner monologue of Stalin

thinking, "Well, war might be coming, and you know, these people in charge of the army may not prove reliable." And that's the background for the cleansing of the army. But how does he know what Stalin thought? He could have thought quite other things. Apparently Stalin suddenly flew into a rage--some people say in a trice--and people had to be destroyed. Precisely because he was against these people, not for high considerations that the Soviet Union needs this or that. Anyhow, it's one of the best books on Stalin, with all these qualities.

Ulam was even my teacher briefly. Professor Friedrich, when I was at Harvard, went to Europe, and so Ulam very ably substituted for him. He was probably getting his doctorate there; I'm not sure. Harvard had this wonderful moment where they were to keep Ulam or [Zbigniew] Brzezinski. They kept Ulam, and Brzezinski went to Columbia to teach. A good choice to have--I mean, good possibilities. I think very highly of Brzezinski in some ways; I disagree with him in others.

In any case, I was asked to review Ulam's book--*In the Name of the People*. It was about the populist movement, and it turned out to be a very bad book. Several things--I think Ulam even has a book against the American student movement, which I did not read. But here he was comparing, for instance, the Russian revolution to the protests we had in American colleges.

Lage: In the sixties you mean?

Riasanovsky: Yes. Totally beside the point. His native language is Polish; he knows Russian very well, but he proceeded to make mistakes in Russian. For instance, "This was decided behind the table." The preposition is "za stolom"--that means "at the table."

He pointed out very well the madness of the Revolutionary movement. But it became also quite obsessive and repetitive, so it was a bad book. And I looked at it and I sort of thought, What am I to do? Should I send it back? I thought, Let's be honest; I'll simply write a review which the book deserves. I did say in the end that we all expect that Professor Ulam will return to his high level in the next publication. The periodical folded, and the review was never published [laughter]. I still have it in my drawer.

I really don't know how he would have reacted. I know him reasonably well; he could have been quite generous or he could have been absolutely enraged. He is an emotional and sort of difficult-to-predict person.

Lage: But you were willing to take that chance.

Riasanovsky: I'm very glad that I did my part [laughter], and it was never published. So these are some of the possibilities. I try to write as few letters to the editor as possible.

Lage: You mean the follow-up on the review and ongoing commentary.

Riasanovsky: Yes. In fact, many editors allow only one answer, or two answers because it can go on indefinitely. One time I did answer was when I was accused of producing the Ukraine suddenly in the seventeenth century, and all I had to do was point to pages in my book where it had existed earlier.

In general, our reviews perhaps tend to be too kind, and I'm part of that. British reviews are generally sharper. An important thing about a review is to say enough about the book. My own use of reviews by others--reading them, that is--is simply to see what the books are, especially to what extent I need to read a book, to what extent it adds something.

Lage: You're not as interested in the reviewer's opinion as in getting the sense of--

Riasanovsky: Exactly. So reviews are bad when they're mainly someone else's presentation--the reviewer's own views.

I have a strange case with the *New York Times*, which there is probably no point in pursuing. By the way, of course you don't get paid for reviews, except when you review for the *New York Times* or some such nonacademic publication. So, it was a review of Astolphe Custine's book on Russia in 1839 in English translation. It was a brilliant early book on Russia, but also mostly wrong.

Lage: Brilliant but mostly wrong?

Riasanovsky: Yes. He didn't know Russian, but his main point is a total lack of freedom. He was just a visitor, not a professor of Russia at all. He talked with the emperor, et cetera; it was a high-level visit, but his main point was what an imitative and repressed society it was. The book said that they

imitate everything; they even imitate sphinxes on the Neva embankment. Well, the sphinxes came from Egypt; they were not imitative [laughter]. And it became very popular in the Cold War and so on. So I reviewed the book.

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Riasanovsky: And I was paid for it--not much--but I accepted payment as usual. And they never published it. And they wouldn't admit that they never published it. They would say, "You must look in a different edition." And I don't know why they never published it.

Lage: When was that?

Riasanovsky: It was a number of years back. I still have the correspondence. They could have said they didn't like the review. My review, part of it, was that the book was very interesting, but as an evaluation of Russia it makes no sense. You come for a few months, you come from a totally different world--and it almost looks as if they did not want my opinion on it.

Lage: Was this review that you submitted during the Cold War?

Riasanovsky: Yes.

Lage: Do you think it was that they didn't want to counter the prevailing view?

Riasanovsky: Yes.

Lage: Does that happen a lot?

Riasanovsky: It happened only once in my life, and I still may be wrong.

Lage: But I mean more generally--we talk about the Soviet dogmas, but what about the Western dogmas and how they might affect what gets written and published.

Riasanovsky: It does not happen in academic journals, and I thought that generally it didn't happen in the country--and it still could be something else. They publish many editions; it could be that they published it in one place but not another. But I did not feel like trying to trace it. It's a little strange. I depend on the New York Times; it's our best newspaper, we subscribe to it. It's one way of trying to keep up with Russia, but this was sort of a sad occasion. And also, all

they had to say was, "Well, we had so much material; we had to skip it," or something of that sort. But no, they said first that it will be published, that it was published, I never got a copy.

Usually I'm treated very nicely by newspapers. The Los Angeles Times, which by the way is a good paper--I don't know it very well, but it's a good paper; our daughter knows it better. Anyhow, they reviewed my *History of Russia* and said that Professor Riasanovsky is so learned that he found material for 711 pages [laughter]. Another million pages has been written by others [laughter].

Editing California Slavic Studies with Gleb Struve

- Lage: Maybe this would be a good place to talk a little bit about your role with the *California Slavic Studies*.
- Riasanovsky: There isn't very much to say. I was with it from the start, and soon the twentieth volume will come out. As everything, there is now stringency. Whether there will be more volumes, I don't know.
- Lage: Who actually publishes it?
- Riasanovsky: The University of California Press. That's one reason I know the University of California Press well. The original editors--I became editor before the first volume even, but it already had been set up--were Professor [Gleb] Struve and I. Professor Struve was a tremendously impressive and demanding scholar.
- Lage: In?
- Riasanovsky: In literature. He has two famous books. One is on Soviet literature and the other is émigré literature. And these books were worth their price in gold and more in the Soviet Union. He was obviously a non-Soviet figure and specialist. He was one of those people who refused to return as long as the Soviet Union was there. He even thought our students shouldn't go. And on the second point I fought with him because, I mean, he doesn't need to learn Russian; our students do.
- Lage: So he was an émigré, I'm assuming.

Riasanovsky: Yes. His father was a very famous figure as an intellectual, at one time on the left--there's even the story that he was the best man or at least an assistant at Lenin's wedding. But he became one of the most famous figures in the sort of more patriotic, moderate, émigré circles. Because his father's name was well-known, Struve's books could not be sent to international exhibits because they would be stolen [laughter].

Lage: Were they in underground circulation?

Riasanovsky: Yes. Well, in any case, he couldn't stand mistakes. He said, "Nikolai Valentinovich, I have to vomit when I see these misprints." [Laughter]

Lage: Did you speak in Russian with him?

Riasanovsky: Yes, although his degree was also from Oxford later, and his English was very good. But yes, I corresponded with him in Russian. At one point we had this issue--

Lage: But wasn't he here on campus?

Riasanovsky: Well, when I was in Paris or whatever. He was very much here on the campus.

So with this ability, there were no misprints in California Slavic Studies. It had an interesting point, that is still vaguely present--although I repeat the publication may not continue--that you had to be somehow connected to the University of California to be published there. All nine campuses; our former students are always included because they got their doctorate here. If someone comes in and gives a brilliant talk we can publish it because it was given here. I think once or twice we even asked people to come so we could publish.

Another special quality of it has been that it published articles of regular size, but also published forty-, fifty-, or sixty-page articles. And these are very difficult to publish because they're too long for most periodicals, and at the same time they're not quite a book.

We both read every article; when at first we would divide the material I would be reading--he has his, and I have mine--and he would come and say, "Nikolai Valentinovich, why don't I take some of your material?" We also had an agreement that if either one of us decides against an

article, it would not be published. Once or twice when it was his students, he was willing to publish what were essentially miserable articles. Well, I blocked that.

Lage: And was that acceptable?

Riasanovsky: Yes.

Lage: Was he a reasonable figure?

Riasanovsky: Yes and no. He was a very demanding and harsh figure in many ways. He would say about some of his students, "He is moving up too fast." [laughter]

Lage: Did his strong feelings about the Soviet Union and not even thinking that you should visit it, did that affect the content of the journal? Did he make any ideological judgments on articles?

Riasanovsky: No. Essentially it was not an ideological periodical. I think for most people it would be described as traditional, mainline, very academic, and so on. But it received almost straight good reviews. We had one problem which was that-- California Slavic Studies, I already told you how we get the materials, and we publish when we have enough material. As I say, soon the twentieth volume will come out. It began in 1960. People keep asking why there was no volume last year. It's very hard to understand that it doesn't go by year; it goes by collected material. Outside of that we got very little criticism, general approval, nothing very exciting. So that's California Slavic Studies.

Lage: Now when you say nothing very exciting, are you referring to the articles?

Riasanovsky: Yes. I mean, they wouldn't be trying to prove that Andropov would reverse the policies, or to participate in this debate: does the American State Department understand the Soviet Union? I think the answer on that is brief [laughter].

And it was also helpful because it gave some of our students who needed publications a chance to publish something sixty or seventy pages. And it does have a very high standing; it was always in demand in Russia in the best libraries. As I say, they don't have hard money funds to buy things. But it was always welcome.

Lage: But they were able to take that even though it had Struve's name on it.

Riasanovsky: Yes. One of the worst thrusts I remember against him--because he was such an enemy--was describing him as *zhabo-obraznyi Struve*--"toad-like Struve." And he looked somewhat like one [laughter]; it wasn't that much off. But that's not a measure of academic excellence.

Lage: No, it's not [laughter]. You say it may not continue. Why?

Riasanovsky: Because of financial issues. It obviously does not make money. The UC Press generally treated us very well, and that's again where my constant link with the Cal press--I also published at least one book by the Cal press, the Nicholas I and official nationality book, and there were other contacts. But their main point was to have more sales and also to have perhaps a clearer theme. The volumes would be miscellaneous by the very nature of it, and they would prefer thematic volumes. We occasionally had those; of course, if you first limit the participants and then you limit the theme, it's not easy to form a volume.

The University of California Press, I had a very high opinion of it--still do in some ways, until, again, changes. The changes came some years back when, I suppose, they fired or didn't promote or perhaps it was simply attrition, but decided to use fewer employees of the press, and what I disliked was they presented this, instead of as an economic necessity if it was one, as, "This way we can tap into the enormous literary and editorial resources of the Bay Area."

Then disaster struck. One of these resources--usually they correct nothing after our reading; what could there be to correct? But this time we had suddenly an imaginative editor, one of these resources of the Bay Area--I don't even know the name, or don't remember it. And the article was on Jewish limitations and treatment and participation in Russia, Austria, and Prussia in the eighteenth century. There would be something about how the Jews could own land in this area but not that area, and the editor would insert a note saying, "So it was still far from Auschwitz."

Well, I was afraid Struve would have a stroke. We returned it to the press--

Lage: You mean it was actually going to be published like this? Or was this just a note to you?

Riasanovsky: No, no, to be published like this--yes, yes, but it was not published like this. He tried to make it up-to-date and interesting. I don't know his background, I don't know what he wanted, but it was full of that. The press also realized what happened, and they didn't even discuss it; they simply withdrew all the corrections, and it was published properly. But what I found unpleasant was that this all was presented as an improvement.

Lage: The P.R. spin on things.

Riasanovsky: Yes. And you know, we had the same spin in the library for a while, and now we admit that it's a bad situation. But we kept going for years short of funds spending--my guess would be, although this is of course not proved--wasting on new improvements and saying that it doesn't hurt anything. And it's the last line that's just out of this world.

But except for this one article, we had little problems with the California Press. With Struve and me there was no chance it would get by. But you know, some people would say, "The editor did his work, now publish it," without looking at it.

XII TEACHING HISTORY AND GUIDING GRADUATE STUDENTS

Lecturing on Western Civ to 1006 Undergraduates

Riasanovsky: Again, I like very much the University of California because to a very large extent I could do what I wanted to.

Lage: Did you teach Western Civilization here [a lower division lecture course]?

Riasanovsky: Yes. And I had 1006 students in one class.

Lage: In Wheeler Auditorium.

Riasanovsky: Twice. The same thing repeated, because Wheeler seats only about 600.

Lage: And so you taught it twice?

Riasanovsky: The same lecture twice. That was '57, '58, '59, something like that--before the student movement. And there was this class of hundreds and hundreds, and there was one man with a wonderful black beard. It was one of those things that covered completely his cheeks and went around. It was not very long, but it was sort of black, and his eyes and his face staring at me, and I would stare at him to get my orientation. I thought, What if he doesn't come to class? [laughter] What happens then?

Lage: I hope he continued to come.

Riasanovsky: He continued to come.

I had either nineteen or twenty-one teaching assistants, and the students were broken up into small groups, so they got not only me. I think of it when the well-meaning

Chancellor Heyman would say, "We must teach well or we won't have students." All we have is students [laughter].

I think that surely European history and Russian history go together. It's hard for me to think of a good historian of Russia who is not at least a passable historian of Europe in general.

A Graduate Class in Russian Intellectual History:
Debates with Martin Malia

Lage: Did you ever teach European intellectual history?

Riasanovsky: European, no. Except I remember giving one seminar on Russian and French, mostly, intellectual developments in the nineteenth century. We had very good people teach it-- lately, Martin Malia, who just retired, and Martin Jay. But Martin Malia and I taught a well-known course in Russian intellectual history, to which people came from Japan, Europe, and so on.

Lage: You taught it in tandem?

Riasanovsky: In tandem. That was the nature of the course.

Lage: That must have been interesting.

Riasanovsky: Yes. You see, we started arguing at Harvard in '46. So we just continued.

Lage: [laughter] Did you teach on alternate days, or were you both there?

Riasanovsky: Both always. That was one absolute rule: we must be there.

Lage: How large a class?

Riasanovsky: In this class we did not admit more than twenty-four or something.

Lage: Was it graduate level?

Riasanovsky: Graduate level and we admitted a few undergraduates. That was one absolute condition, to be in class, because

otherwise you would never get Martin Malia. And much of my energy went into arguing, "No, no, you cannot miss it."

Lage: You mean he tended not to show up?

Riasanovsky: Yes. First of all, I suppose--it was from like two in the afternoon--because he sleeps until twelve, he works 'til two, and on it goes. But he is very good at discussion.

Martin is Irish-American, of course; Malia is the same as O'Malley. Martin, the more he drinks, the less he sleeps, the better he talks, so he was usually in excellent form [laughter].

Lage: What kinds of things do you differ on?

Riasanovsky: We differ on many things.

Lage: In this class?

Riasanovsky: Well, the scheme was that he presents some material, I present some--more or less fifty-fifty, although we were not precise about it--then the other makes comments, then there's a general discussion. And students are very much encouraged to talk. They had to write one paper, and there is an examination. As I said earlier one advantage, in certain ways, of Harvard or Yale, of Oxford--even more special--is that they don't get the lower third of our students, and in that course we didn't get the lower third either. I remember a brilliant student in that class from theoretical physics, and so on. So we had some perfectly brilliant students.

Lage: At the graduate level you wouldn't make that same comment, would you, about the lower third group of students?

Riasanovsky: No, only undergraduate.

So this was the nature of the course. Originally we also said that I will cover movements and intellectuals on the Right, he those on the Left. But the main difference was in interpretation, and the course declined in interest when the difference became smaller.

Martin Malia is a brilliant man. I had to write a number of letters in support of his grants, as he sometimes wrote letters for me, so I am a specialist in praising Martin Malia. To summarize though, it's almost the unique

combination of a man who is essentially a social scientist-- who believes in structures, who has a very sharp and skeptical mind, and who at the same time is magnificent in culture. It's usually one or the other.

Lage: Usually you don't find the social scientist approach--

Riasanovsky: And the cultural approach combined at the highest level in one person.

Lage: So that's his strength.

Riasanovsky: Yes. Enormous strength. He cannot finish books; after twenty years he is still finishing this book--that when it comes out will be a major book--of Russia under Western eyes, which is not Russian but which is really Western intellectual history as to how the West perceived Russia.

Riasanovsky: It has much on Russian ballet, etcetera, etcetera; very rich and sensitive in regard to culture. But he had this way of explaining purges even, and of explaining, for example, in the 1860s the sudden movement to the Right, and to the Left, to extremes, and I feel that's still unexplained. If I really had a very, very long life when I could work, and that's asking too much, I would write a book on what happened in the 1860s. His point was that nothing happened. These things are quite logical and can be explained. So we argued why his explanations don't work.

Lage: So he had explanations, but you felt they didn't--

Riasanovsky: For everything.

Lage: And is this a social scientist's approach that everything has an explanation?

Riasanovsky: Of course, yes.

Lage: Is that typical of historians?

Riasanovsky: No. It's typical of a certain kind of historian. And I repeat, the interesting thing about Martin Malia is that he is that kind of historian and also another, and both at the top level.

Our greatest differences were on the Soviet Union.

Lage: And how did you differ on that? You said you would take the Right, and he would take the Left.

Riasanovsky: That's a different thing; that's material. You see, with both these kinds, Right and Left, if I present something on the Right and say I cannot explain it, then he'll proceed to explain it to our class. I'll tell him why his explanation doesn't work. So we're talking about two different things: material and approach. The real collapse of Martin's position was on the Soviet Union, because he kept explaining the Soviet Union logically, and I kept telling him it can't be so explained, it's all so irrational and impossible. And then one day he agreed. Much of his work is in French, and he is more highly regarded probably in France than in the United States, and he used the term surreal to describe the Soviet performance--as in the case of the Soviet crematorium where the sign said that the last corpse should turn off the lights. [laughter] So he agreed with me on the irrationality of the system. And then, you see, our great debate on the Soviet Union lost interest.

Lage: So at some point in his life he accepted your view that it could not be explained.

Riasanovsky: Yes, but not because of me, but because of the Soviet system. In that class we had some degree candidates from Japan, who are now professors there, other people too who became notable scholars, and we had really an altogether brilliant group of students. I remember for instance Terry [Terence] Emmons, who is now professor at Stanford and one of the best specialists in the world in Russian history, sitting next to Robert Hughes, who recently retired as professor and onetime chairman of our department of Slavic Languages and Literatures, and on and on. That's the kind of class we got.

Lage: Did you do this more than once?

Riasanovsky: Many times. But that was another thing: both of us had to be here, and both of us had to have some room to teach it. So we did it, I don't know, six or seven times. But not every year, not every two years. And there would usually be this ploy--first Martin would agree, then he would say, "Couldn't you teach this course alone next year?" I said, "No, that's one thing that can't be done. The course depends on the debate." Originally in the cafés in Cambridge.

Lage: That's where it started.

Riasanovsky: Yes, both graduate students. The interesting thing is that time and again I was asked how long and how hard do we prepare for the debates. Of course, we did not prepare at all, because getting Martin in class was already an achievement [laughter]. I could not expect him also to be available for discussion the evening before.

Lage: I think that would have taken something from it, if you had had your discussion the evening before.

Riasanovsky: Sure, sure. It worked extremely well, and people didn't believe us that it's not programmed. And Martin doesn't talk so much about his memory as I do, but he has a splendid memory, and we could even go back to '46, if we wanted to, on some comments. So that was a very interesting course. There were difficulties. For instance, I remember sitting here; we had to meet occasionally, mainly to draw up the assignments and also divide who is on the Right and who is on the Left and who is the first speaker. But I had to tell him again that no, you cannot come after I finish talking; you've got to be there. [laughter]

Lage: He really had a problem with--

Riasanovsky: He was always way behind on everything he does. And then the secretary comes in and says, "Professor Malia, here is a telegram for you." Well, the telegram demands--it's the New York Times or something--his review which is overdue--

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Riasanovsky: I said, "Go finish the review. We'll meet again tomorrow." He says, "Don't worry, Nick. It's only the first telegram." [laughter] So that's his style.

That was the most interesting course we taught in intellectual history. Quite a few people noticed it and have spoken nicely of it. Walicki, whom I mentioned many times--we invited him to lecture on several occasions--presented in fact one of his later books as a lecture in our course, and so on. So it was a very interesting experience. But as I say it became less interesting as Martin decided that there is no social science explanation for the Soviet Union [laughter].

The Upper Division Course in Russian History

Riasanovsky: I taught, of course, other courses. We teach, and still do, Russian history in three semesters: from the start to Peter the Great; from Peter the Great to 1917; from 1917 to the present, Soviet Russia, though now there is some post-Soviet material.

Lage: And this is an undergraduate upper-division class.

Riasanovsky: Exactly. And the difficulty with that course was to hit the right level. We got everyone from a relatively few people who spoke Russian natively, or were from the Russian community where they spoke only several hundred words, or people from Slavic Languages and Literatures who had learned the language--a few people--to people, most of them, who were totally ignorant of the field and the language.

We all decided--again, we had remarkable agreement--

Lage: Now when you say "all"--

Riasanovsky: Zelnik, Martin and I. First, Martin and I and Zelnik; now Zelnik and I and Slezkine and no Martin. We agreed that it should be a general course accessible to California students. If they don't know Russian--even if they don't care about it, but came to the course, let them come. With this proviso, it's very difficult to say what is the average right level.

Recently, it became mandatory or close to it, to ask student opinion. Well, I did that on my own much earlier; not that it's necessarily right, but it can be a major contact with students. And one question I always asked was--it is anonymous; you don't state your name--whether you find the course too easy or too difficult or the right level. And then I would count how many said too easy, how many said too difficult, and consider it next time.

Lage: And how did it come out?

Riasanovsky: I made adjustments. It came out on the whole in a satisfactory manner. Some people found it too difficult; I remember you did give your major, your year, etcetera. I remember someone who was a senior in physics who wrote "ridiculously easy." [laughter] Probably again a very intelligent person. I always had many students in these

courses--one rule was that you had to have thirty students to have a reader. Every time I had a reader; I was never without a reader.

We also changed around who taught what, but I usually taught the first part. The second part we all taught, and the Soviet part I usually taught after I returned from the Soviet Union for decompression purposes.

Lage: Oh, you would teach the Soviet part also.

Riasanovsky: Sure. It's part of the book; it's part of history. It's nice to have it in the past. But it worked very nicely, and I appreciated this course very much.

Lage: You've mentioned having a couple of students in courses who were theoretical physicists. What's your take on the intellectual capacity of an accomplished historian versus a scientist?

Riasanovsky: There are different kinds of intellect. My impressions is, although I'm not a theoretical physicist or mathematician, that it is easier to have limited capacities and still write useful history, and I suppose you can't write useful theoretical physics on a limited capacity.

I remember a funny incident. I was at a table in the Faculty Club, and there was a visiting speaker, and people knew little about him. Someone said, "At least he's a Rhodes scholar, so he has to be intelligent." And Owen Chamberlain said, "Rhodes scholars are not especially intelligent." And, of course, in his league they are not [laughter].

Lage: Did you stand up in defense for the Rhodes scholars?

Riasanovsky: Of course not. I mean, look at our president now--who, by the way, did badly at Oxford apparently. It was a very nice evaluation--he had certain gifts and so on, but no reliability and no persistence.

Lage: Is that actually what they said about Clinton at Oxford?

Riasanovsky: It was worded a little more tactfully. But he never got a degree at Oxford because he was busy traveling. That in itself is no disaster; some very able people didn't get degrees. But what I'm trying to say is that it is of course relative, and the reason I like to remember--I know Owen

Chamberlain only a little. It was not at all snobbish; it was a completely natural statement. I would say about someone, "His Russian is pretty good, but needs improvement," without feeling, "Ah ha! But mine is better," and so on. Probably theoretical physicists are ahead in sheer intelligence. Although I might add one more thing: I know mathematicians who think only very few theoretical physicists really know mathematics and have high intelligence. So you see there are further categories.

Undergraduate Proseminars

Riasanovsky: I have taught seminars of different kinds. History 103s are small groups called seminars--I don't like it because the word seminar to me implies research and knowledge of languages--there you teach whatever subject you select.

Lage: The 103?

Riasanovsky: Yes. My two favorite subjects were the connection between ideology and power, ideology and government. And I got papers on fascism, on Nazism, and of course on Russia too, et cetera.

Lage: But was this not confined to Russia?

Riasanovsky: No.

Lage: And what kind of reading would you assign?

Riasanovsky: Reading would depend of course on what the person is doing. Quite early, people select and then--one time for instance they report orally on the book they find especially useful for their purpose. It's presumptuous to allow anything, but not that presumptuous because if I get something, let us say, on India, I can ask Irschick or Metcalf.

I got some very interesting people. I remember one person who spoke English with an accent, who had a stunning knowledge of terrorism in Italy and eventually wrote a paper --a controversial paper, because he argued of the fascist influence on Italian terrorism, while most of that terrorism was Left, not fascist. But his argument referred to devaluing life and using violence. I finally said, "You know too much. How come?" He said his father was in charge

of anti-terrorism in Italy. So he knew it well. So you see I often had very interesting students. In that group I also often would have some students from the Russian community who knew Russian.

Well, that was one of my two favorite subjects. The other was comparing something in the Soviet period with something in the imperial period. Whether you want to compare Stalin with Peter the Great, or education, or censorship, or whatever. And that also worked well.

By the way, 103 is very much in demand and very interesting, but can be very different things. For instance, in a 103 class which was on comparing something to the Soviet Union to something in Imperial Russia, I required--although it could be adjusted--first taking the lectures. Now if someone was in Russian literature and knew that well and didn't take all of the history sequence, I would also admit him or her. But you see, it was in that sense more advanced. It was not, strictly speaking, a research project because topics were too large--research, needless to say, is important, but so are other things such as the ability to write on important topics of the kind I suggest.

What I'm getting to is that some other colleagues, some other professors, quite legitimately do other things in 103. For instance, Borah thought--and I have the highest regard for Borah--it's a good way to open up a totally new subject. You know nothing about Mexico, and here in one short course, you come to know a lot. Which in a sense is the opposite of what I was doing.

Lage: So he would take students who are new to the subject.

Riasanovsky: Yes, and would not take students who were specializing in Latin America. So you see why I'm saying that if you talk to someone else about 103, don't be surprised if it's something very different. Students like this course very much, and they also have a great choice.

I must say, by contrast, one time I taught the 39, which was for freshmen.

Lage: Is it an honors course?

Riasanovsky: No. It was to me a disappointing course, because people really knew nothing.

Lage: Was it a small class? A seminar--

Riasanovsky: Yes. The idea is why not have it for freshmen. We ended up by studying hard the Langer series on history, instead of anything more imaginative. But again there, because of this position here, we had some advantages. One of the books was written by Sontag. So after we studied it, I invited Sontag to discuss it with us. Another was written by Gordon Wright of Stanford, and I invited Gordon Wright to discuss it. And students were very impressed.

Lage: I would imagine.

Riasanovsky: One thing that happened was that perhaps a year and a half later, Sontag died. And I think out of eight people, seven came to me at that point--although they were not my students anymore--to note that fact and talk about it.

Lage: Well, that makes quite an impression on a freshman.

Riasanovsky: Yes, but in general, I think it was not a practical course because the idea was, you see, you start immediately more personally, more imaginatively, and so on. But if you get to the point where you say "Napoleon," and they look blank--[laughter]. That goes back to my earlier complaints about poor schools.

Relations with Students: Consideration, Politics, the Naked Guy

Riasanovsky: As I often told Arlene, it's good I'm not leading a double life because it would be totally impossible. At the airport, I remember I was meeting Maria, I was getting the suitcases, and someone said, "I was your student in '64." [laughter] Same day, on BART [Bay Area Rapid Transit], "I was your student in '72." At the football games repeatedly people come and say, "I was your student," and one of them a couple years ago said, "and you certainly did a great thing for me." And I tried to think very hard what was the great thing. I couldn't [laughter].

Lage: Well, maybe it was just the teaching.

Riasanovsky: It could be, but I also tend to be considerate. I remember, for example, we had a student teaching assistant who

suddenly disappeared and did not meet her classes. And the question was what to do? Should we drop her? She returned. What happened was that the morning of one of her classes she was told she had cancer. And she panicked and flew back home to see her doctor. I remember that Borah and I and one other person voted to do nothing, accept the situation. The other two voted against; we can't have such teaching assistants. In all of these matters I tend to take what the student says; of course it would be a very serious transgression, if she left for a lesser reason.

Once the *Daily Cal* editor took our intellectual history. And then he asked to be excused from something because he was going to the Democratic National Convention, with the elections coming. We released him, only I told him that next year he'll have to find a different reason [laughter].

But I can say that somehow I never had trouble with students; you know that we have complicated procedures if your grades are challenged, etcetera. It never happened.

And I had to rewrite my reader's comments only once. His comments were, "How can you be so stupid?" The reader came from French schools, from a Russian family, and it was his first acquaintance with the class, and it was really libelous commentary. But that happened only once, and I explained to him, "Just don't comment; correct." [laughter]

Lage: How did you deal with students who came with a very politicized view of the Soviet Union?

Riasanovsky: I had no problems. It was somewhat striking occasionally. I remember for instance, one time a student came and his complaint was that I presented collectivization too positively, which I didn't. But I remember he said something like, "Why? They were worse than the Nazis." And the man was Jewish.

Lage: So would you engage him in--

Riasanovsky: I would invite him to coffee, et cetera. I always welcome questions. We had at times people who came in hard hats from some left-wing group which was supposed to be dangerous but they were not dangerous in my class. And I already mentioned the Naked Guy. [A Cal student in the 1990s, who received considerable media attention by attending classes naked.]

Lage: No, you didn't mention the Naked Guy.

Riasanovsky: Well, he was in my class. He even in some interview-- [Professor Leon] Litwack caught it--said that his favorite course was Russian history. Litwack triumphantly brought the article to me. He didn't say whose class it was. But with the Naked Guy--

Lage: So he would come naked to your class?

Riasanovsky: I don't know. He certainly didn't wear a shirt; he sat up there, he didn't disturb anyone, so I don't know.

Lage: You didn't examine it that carefully.

Riasanovsky: No, absolutely not, and it's not my function. There was this one time when I was brusque, I suppose--some reporters came. They said, "Could we just be quiet and train our cameras at the Naked Guy?" I said, "While I'm teaching the course, you'll be out." And they went out, and that was it. I noticed that after the course the Naked Guy and the reporters went cheerfully together; what they were discussing, I don't know [chuckle]. But I rarely put people out. That's the only case I can remember. Well, there was very good reason for it; it shouldn't be a kind of a circus.

Politics in Studying Russia and the Soviet Union: Bill Mandel, Soviet Émigrés, Ukrainian Nationalism

Lage: Did you have a connection with or interchange with people in the community who were interested in the Soviet Union? I'm thinking of Bill Mandel, whom I used to hear on KPFA, and his view of the Soviet Union.

Riasanovsky: I have a number of colleagues who hate Mandel.

Lage: Do you know him?

Riasanovsky: Well, yes, over a long time. First, he appeared at Iowa. He was scheduled to talk, and there was a debate between him and a kind of a mainline, proper political scientist by the name of Vernon Van Dyke, and I was chairman, and I was managing the meeting. So we met. He speaks excellent Russian. Of course he was in Russia for many years; I

discovered that. But he spent the first fifteen of his thirty minutes of his rebuttal saying how heroic we are to invite him. There was no McCarthyism in Iowa, there was nothing heroic. [laughter]

Lage: This was in the fifties?

Riasanovsky: Yes. It was rather misjudging his audience. Then of course he appeared here. He considers--perhaps no longer--but perhaps he considers me his friend because I remember being asked, is he qualified to talk about the Soviet Union? I said of course he is. Few people know it that well, and it's sort of his own point of view. He thinks that he was the best expert in the country, which isn't true.

Lage: He seemed to have such a rosy view of everything in the Soviet Union.

Riasanovsky: Absolutely. And it's very hard to take it because he lived there long. I must say that the Soviet Union was magnificent in its own way. He did say something like, Well, there may be some discrimination against Jews; and the next year he didn't get a visa [laughter]. So they followed him closely. I know that some people who know him better, people I respect, really hate him. I have no hatred. I have a book of his on Central Asia, which is all right.

Lage: Does he have an academic background in the field?

Riasanovsky: Yes. I don't know if he got a doctorate, but he has an academic background.

Lage: In history?

Riasanovsky: In history, I think. Political science or sociology, perhaps. In terms of knowledge, he would be in the upper one-tenth of one percent in our country or more, obviously. The point of view is hard to take, because usually people who see it so rosy don't know what they're talking about. He presumably does.

Lage: He was there more--at greater length--than most people.

Riasanovsky: But I've heard people say that he's dishonest, and he slanders and so on. I don't know that at all, personally. Recently I even got some mailing about a battle at KPFA, defend Mandel or whatever. I didn't react to that because for one thing I don't know what the battle was over or

about. If it was discovered he was pro-Soviet, it's sort of late [laughter].

Lage: You seem to take a very balanced view towards Soviet Russia. Did some of your colleagues who also had a tie--you've mentioned so many that had some tie, being Russian émigrés. Were they more emotionally opposed to the Soviet Union?

Riasanovsky: Yes. Certainly.

Lage: Sort of on the other side from Mandel.

Riasanovsky: Oh, yes. That's a more prominent side in many ways. Of course if you don't write history, it's different. I'm not against emotional opposition; there's good reason for it in most cases. I told you, though, that every edition of *History of Russia* I tried to go over again, Am I too anti-Soviet? And I wound up being more anti-Soviet. If that's balanced, okay. They did the balancing.

. Of course there are all kinds of hatreds involved. One is very clear: people who absolutely hate the Soviet government. Often it goes back to the revolution, it goes back to personal losses. I said one of the strange ways history works is that some of these--I didn't know many, but occasionally at larger parties or at church--half-drunk Cossacks or White commanders put it more correctly than the social scientists [laughter]. You see, the system did collapse.

There are other kinds of hatreds on nationality and nationalism. For instance, the Ukrainian position is very strong in this respect. Until recently, there were more Ukrainians than Russians in the United States. And I'm very surprised that my *History of Russia* is accepted, is used, in almost all universities. I'm not against Ukraine, certainly. And I think in democratic terms, obviously people should be what they want to be. But my main view is the mainline view of Russian historiography that in Kievan days there was one Russia, the differentiation is later. It doesn't mean that therefore Ukraine cannot be independent. I had, though, as I already said, one exchange in the *Slavic Review* where I was accused of suddenly producing Ukraine in the seventeenth century out of nothing. All I had to do was to point to earlier pages in my history, which apparently the writer hadn't read, and that ended the discussion.

There are tremendous hatreds among the Ukrainians too. It's a deeply divided community several ways. For one thing, it's one of the few nationalist movements linked to religion and divided into two religious parts. In other words, Orthodox and Uniate Catholic--to the extent that you have to have at Ukrainian gatherings two invocations and two blessings.

Lage: Even though they see themselves as--

Riasanovsky: As Ukrainians, yes. Well, I suppose each part considers the other being not enough Ukrainian. In fact, a papal-sponsored meeting in Canada on the thousandth anniversary of Christianity, 988, couldn't be held because they fought so much. It had to be called off. Their view also--that's another thing--is that Christianity came to Ukraine first--"they", I mean, it's too broad; there are all kinds of Ukrainian historians, but oversimplifying it--Christianity came to Russia later somewhere in the northeast at the Finnic base, while the real legacy is Ukrainian.

The president of the Russian-American organization--a rather crude establishment--thought that he would go to Washington and explain to the government what Russia really is, as if no one ever thought of it--but in any case, he would telephone me about these things. "What am I to do?" And I kept telling him, "Keep quiet. Do not quarrel. There is enough Christianity for both; let them celebrate, you also celebrate." You know it was an issue in Congress.

Lage: It was an issue in Congress?

Riasanovsky: Yes. Whom to congratulate with a thousand years of Christianity, how, and when. Unfortunately we congratulated even the Georgians, whose Christianity came six centuries earlier.

Also I was, I guess, lucky, because here Ukrainians are less prominent than Russians.

Lage: Here in California?

Riasanovsky: Yes, in the Bay Area especially. For instance, I think in New York they have a twenty-four-hour radio program in Ukrainian, in Philadelphia, and so on. So there I might have had more problems.

Lage: And would you expect that they wouldn't appreciate your treatment in the *History of Russia*?

Riasanovsky: They cannot appreciate it, at least mainline Ukrainian nationalists because they would like to have Kievan history--the first part--only Ukrainian. Again, it's a very major argument; I don't know to what to compare it. But let's say to what extent Italian legacy is Roman and to what extent is it Germanic. Or in France--southern France: is it Roman or is it Germanic? But the argument is not very strong to my mind. For example, if Kiev was really Ukrainian, Novgorod was Russian; at the time the two were connected.

The great literature from Kiev is *byliny*, which is an epic tale cycle, like, let's say, Homer. And it's not known in Ukraine, and it's known only in north Russia. The explanation is that Ukraine was invaded and swept over a dozen times and northern Russia never. But you see, these northern people consider it their literature, so at one time it was. And I repeat, I would leave open what follows. I mean, it doesn't mean that if you were together in the twelfth century, you must be together in the twenty-first. So I'm surprised when I read that at, say, some Canadian universities, Ukrainian professors still use my history. But there is much hatred and criticism in the field certainly.

Lage: Do these kinds of things come out in, say, *Slavic Review* or the other journals?

Riasanovsky: Yes, in various ways. For instance, a colleague of mine wrote what to me was a very scholarly article. It was sent to the journal, and one point made there was "in all my research on the Soviet Union I never saw any discrimination against Ukrainians qua Ukrainians." And one of the readers absolutely blew his top and said that you cannot publish this immoral sentence. Fortunately, the editor of the *Slavic Review* knew what the situation was, so he sent it to still another reader, and the article was published. To this man writing--it was millions of Ukrainians starved, and he said there is no discrimination. Of course, the counter argument is that the millions of others also starved.

In most of Russia peasant land was held by the commune. In Ukraine it was held individually. It was much more difficult to force individuals, often prosperous, into the collective farm than commune people. But you see this is

not qua Ukrainians. Another point, people who enforced this utter horror in Ukraine--I haven't seen any study, but I would guess--were mostly Ukrainians. The Ukrainian communist party is part of the general party. But you see how bitter such exchanges can be. I think I'm in a sense, again, lucky not to have been involved in any--

Lage: You say you were lucky but it must have something to do with your approach or manner.

Riasanovsky: Well, perhaps. As I say, I think I'm fair to Ukrainians, and I'm not at all anti-Ukrainian, but it's also a very difficult thing because you're not either/or. There are so many millions of Russians in Ukraine, but also so many millions whom you cannot say whether they're Russian or Ukrainian. The languages are mutually understandable, people lived together for centuries. Typically, a Ukrainian ending is -o; Russian would be -ov or -ev. Just look at the mixed names in the Ukrainian and the Russian governments.

Lage: Is there a physical difference?

Riasanovsky: No.

##

Lage: All of this must feed into your interest in nationalism.

Riasanovsky: Oh, yes. It's an issue of identity. At the moment, it's fortunately relatively peaceful. That of course would be a total disaster if we had a civil war in Ukraine or Ukraine and Russia. I don't foresee one, and let's hope not.

I'm thinking what other objections there would be to my position. History's always highly individual; there could be different interpretations of so many things, but I think that not enough to cause deep rifts or hatreds. I was often asked to write more on the Soviet Union [in *History of Russia*], but I don't do it on purpose. I am not primarily a scholar of the Soviet Union, but also I do insist on my book being one volume and covering--and this of course is presumptuous in a sense--in some proportion the entire history. So the Soviet Union is only one part of it.

Assigned Reading, Grading, and Teaching the Complexity of History

Lage: You've designed *History of Russia* for three-quarter courses, or three-semester courses?

Riasanovsky: Not that. First of all, let's say the book is 650 pages. It's only then 200 pages on the average per semester. But of course that's not enough reading even with our skimpy assignments, so usually they read other books too. I also--this infuriates the Oxford Press--I do not require that the book be purchased.

Lage: In your own class?

Riasanovsky: Yes. I put as many as I can on the library shelves. There are a great many second-hand copies. I now had people who bring books their father used.

Lage: [laughter] And ask you what revisions you've made so they write them in?

Riasanovsky: In a sense, although I absolutely object to it, I had a supporter recently--perhaps in *Daily Cal* and elsewhere--saying that a professor shouldn't assign their books to their own classes. I must say that some people nevertheless do purchase the book. But quite seriously, you see, it's only 200 pages, roughly 225, for each term--you can take a weekend, go to the library, read the pages and then read other books too.

Lage: What other books would you assign? Or do you?

Riasanovsky: It's my particular style--people have to read two complete books from a list. The list for the third term may be 450 books [chuckle]. For the second term perhaps 150, and perhaps 60 for the first, reflecting pretty much what there is available in English. I also tell students who read Russian, or for that matter German or French, see me separately; there are many more books. And then on the examination they are to answer a question based on books. In addition, I suggested--again going to the library--they read at least one other text and mine, preferably before the lectures.

In addition, they read something in the sources. But I tell them, which is true although unpleasant, that you

really cannot base at this level your study on Russian sources. You don't have the language, you don't know the context.

The reading question I always grade myself. I do not assume that my readers have read the 450 books.

Lage: So you will look at a portion of each person's final.

Riasanovsky: Yes. And that I would grade. I would also often read doubtful cases. Occasionally someone gets an A+; I would like to see that. There can also be other difficulties. Of course, it's not an open book final. The rule on Russian names is if I can see whom they mean, it counts; if it's so twisted that I cannot, it doesn't count [laughter].

Lage: Well, what have been your impressions of the quality of these essays you'll get on the books you've assigned.

Riasanovsky: For one thing, very good. Very good. There are exceptions. Usually it counts twenty points of the hundred points, and there are always quite a few people who get twenty and then nineteen. There is a reason for it: because they can be prepared in advance. They don't know the question, but they should know the books. And I tell them that I'm not going to ask, What is on page forty-three? I generally ask about books, Was it a good book? Why? Why not? What did you learn from it? What was the author's point of view? How would you improve the book? Not necessarily all of these questions, but--

Lage: Just to get a sense if they have thought about it.

Riasanovsky: And generally it's the best question, as I say, because the others they cannot prepare in the same way. It goes with my insistence that people read books rather than pages.

At times we have this sort of a baby-fed, precise--"here are two good pages"--or some of my colleagues, not at California, but for example, if you teach Napoleon--five pages for, five pages against, and you feel like you get historical debate, which of course is actually enormously more complex. I also try to teach some appreciation of how history is done and what is done and the complexity of it, not simply summarize it. I think I'm lucky here again in this sense: generally I write clearly, so my tendency is to be very clear. It's also important not to be too clear.

Lage: Or they'll think that history is clear?

Riasanovsky: Yes. Also, one thing I disagree with some people, although there's a middle area, but I do not create historical problems. I think it should be presented as it actually is in present time historiography, when I discuss authors. History itself has so many serious problems and so many issues that there's no need to invent new ones.

Lage: What kind of thing would be invented? I'm not sure what you mean.

Riasanovsky: For example, suppose Peter the Great were ruling Russia instead of Nicholas II. Or what are the main advantages and disadvantages of the Russian peasant's position?

Lage: That's a question you wouldn't ask.

Riasanovsky: No, I wouldn't. Because very often this goes three things for, three things against, while actually the issue is very complex. Until actually, the early 1950s, most Russians were peasants. So you are dealing here with the whole history, and you should ask questions historically at whatever time.

Lage: You've given a lot of thought to your teaching, I can tell.

Riasanovsky: Yes. And I think this is one clear distinction: that an educated person should at least know some facts. But at the same time, I do want students to have their own opinions and make up their own minds, and that's very pronounced at the graduate level; I absolutely refuse to assign dissertation topics.

Lage: Do you give suggestions?

Riasanovsky: Only if asked and along certain lines. In other words I would not say, Now if you were to go into psychology, do this. If someone would ask, Do we understand why Nicholas II did this and that and what is the situation with Nicholas II in literature, well, I can discuss that. The dissertation is very important; it often sort of directs a student for the rest of his life.

By the way, this is also controversial; there are people at the other extreme. I mentioned David Landes; he had a very clear idea of what should be done in the field.

Lage: And he would assign?

Riasanovsky: Yes. And so did Tom Kuhn. I told you about Langer's seminar--Langer was of course a very famous diplomatic historian at Harvard; I didn't take that seminar, but many people I knew did. It was on the summer of 1939, the summer of the outbreak of the Second World War. Each seminar paper was on one week of that summer. You see the advantages of that.

Lage: And you knew what you were getting into when you took the course.

Riasanovsky: Yes. But on the other hand, what if one doesn't want the summer of '39?

Directing Doctoral Dissertations, from Choice of Topic, to Documentation, to Commas

Lage: Let's talk more about some of your graduate students. You keep referring to this shelf filled with books published from dissertations here.

Riasanovsky: Yes. They were very good. There were perhaps twenty or twenty-five people whose doctoral dissertations I directed, and don't forget that we have three professors of Russian history, and we also have three members on the doctoral dissertation committee, with the provision that one has to be outside the department. Again, it was a source of some misunderstanding because that means--simple arithmetic--that if you divide three evenly, and it's not quite even--for instance, Slezkine has recently come in; Martin Malia, although he did a lot of work, was often in Europe--but if you divide it up, then I would not be on a third of the committees. And I would be asked, "Why weren't you on his committee? Do you really approve of him? Why didn't he work with you?" And the explanation is very simple. So if I say I have twenty doctoral candidates or a few more, that is where I directed it. That means if you don't add forty more, you can add thirty more whose dissertations I read.

And as I said before, it has been a remarkably harmonious Russian field. Even with Zelnik and Malia, eventually at least completely on opposite political poles, it did not affect the reading of the dissertations. And by

the way, both of them think highly of the other's work. So the result is that I must make an effort now sometimes to say, Did I direct the dissertation or not? Because I feel that close to the person.

Lage: Oh, you mean when you read it or directed it.

Riasanovsky: Yes. I'm still trying to say how many. If you want those I directed, twenty or so. If you want those where I was on the dissertation committee, then considerably more. And the dividing line is not clear.

Lage: And what's involved in directing? From your point of view at least.

Riasanovsky: That's a good question. I tend to be, as I said, a very permissive director, and not at all an obtrusive one. The first and most important thing--or one of the most important things, at least--is to find a topic, to find the approach for the topic, to structure it, and all this a candidate must do himself. I absolutely refuse to.

I even have done something which perhaps could be questionable, accepting one or two dissertations where I was not really competent, but in this case we invited outside specialists because I did not want to prevent a highly qualified student wanting to do it from doing so. But I repeat, it never got by without real expert judgment.

The books I'm proud of as dissertations--I'm not proud of every one of them. Here I remember Berlin's statement. I was actually introducing him at a talk, and I said, "I'm his student, but I'm cautious because I remember he once said, 'So-and-so was my student. I'm not proud of him. I'm not proud of him at all.'" And after the talk Berlin said, "Why did you say that? Whom do you mean?" And I said, "So-and-so." He said, "Correct! I'm not proud of him at all." [laughter]

But of some I am proud, and it's of course because we get very good people. So the foundation is theirs. Beyond that comes the work itself. There I read it at least twice, I read the chapters as they come in, I read the complete work. I also emphasize that with any difficulty or any special problems, the student could come and discuss it. And then of course I can and should be of help. Again, page by page--although it depends on the student.

I had one student--it was early in my teaching at Cal-- who sent me a dissertation out of the blue. He had been working before I came on one subject--the subject was Miliukov. Then he wrote a dissertation while he was in Russia--an American student, a strange one--on Russian education. He said he did not want the former topic--"Let the dead bury their dead." I wrote back and said, "Why then are you in history?" But in that case, it was good enough, and I promptly accepted it. It's a book there [gestures], and it's a book often referred to. The man was very able, although somewhat unusual; he is the only student I had who came back from Russia arguing for preventive war.

Lage: What was his background? He was American?

Riasanovsky: American, Catholic. Apparently Jesuit schools, and then for whatever reason decided not to continue for priesthood. Very intelligent. He mainly was unpleasant; he once said that he wanted to meet me at three-thirty because it's easier to park his car.

So you see you can even get a doctorate with very little participation. Usually there is much and sometimes very much.

Lage: Well, you mentioned page-by-page. Now that really seems--

Riasanovsky: Well, they sent them to me. Chapters come in and I correct every page.

Lage: Their thinking, their lack of clarity?

Riasanovsky: Everything. All the commas--thinking of Struve, I don't know how the students did it. But the point is that of course there are larger questions which are perhaps more important. For instance, a recent dissertation--a very able one which will come out as a book next year--the woman was one kind of fortunate students we get, Catherine Evtukhov, born in Los Angeles, also a very able musician, from a Russian family, whose Russian is completely native and whose English is completely native. I've had a number of students whose Russian was in a sense their native language. Well, she wrote on a complicated and very important but little-known--outside, at least, of the field--Russian intellectual figure, Sergei Bulgakov, who was for many years the head of the very important and famous theological academy in Paris. She sort of worried whether she'll get a job; well, she got

a fine job at Georgetown, where the Jesuits apparently appreciated it.

In any case, her question time and again was, "Can I do it?" And what she meant by that is, "With this evidence, can I say so or not?" She was reconstructing his thought. She was trying to run a parallel between his theological and economic views. He was an economic specialist to begin with. He came from a clerical family; he had a real conversion and change. This is of course difficult and important, and her question was always, "Can I say that?" In most cases, she could. This kind of intellectual procedure had to be confirmed or strengthened all the time.

There are numerous general rules that apply. For example, how many times have I said that saying something several times does not necessarily make it stronger. Try to condense it; try to say it in one place. There are many difficulties with beginning writers. One important point again refers to particular passages--not an abstract point--but the distinction between what you say and what your material says, and what the person you write about says. It's very easy to switch and get confused.

The issue of documentation, which of course varies in different cases, but many things have to be documented. With many, not Evtukhov, mistakes in Russian--Russian is an inflected language so you have to use the right case, and people often have it in the nominative because they only know the dictionary word, and so on.

Lage: Have a lot of your students been native speakers?

Riasanovsky: Several. Usually from émigré families. Some who were not learned very well. By the way, a very good school for that was the Monterey military school [Defense Language Institute].

Lage: So did some come out of that?

Riasanovsky: A couple, yes. Beyond that there are several good schools. Indiana is one, specializing in languages, Middlebury in New England [Vermont], and so on. So there are various ways to learn it. I try very hard to insist--it's difficult and often doesn't work--but you should continue learning all your life, and finally you might know it as well as Martin Malia and Hugh McLean, who are my heroes because of course they have no Russian background. With Martin Malia, it's

such a natural manner that people say he must have at least a Russian uncle [laughter]. It's actually the point where if he makes a mistake, people do not think it's a mistake because even in English you can make a mistake--simply forget a word or what. Well, few people can reach that proficiency. I already told you that Martin Malia's French is perfect.

The most important thing is to read fluently, read completely, although speaking also helps.

##

Lage: Did most of your students go to Russia to research?

Riasanovsky: Yes. In spite of Struve [laughter]. And they learned very much. There's another point I should make: as I said before, California is a remarkable university for its enormous span of students. For instance, Evtukhov, Sablinsky, Lukashevich, had Russian as their native language and backgrounds similar to mine. (Without being modest, never quite as good in a sense--I really was in a professor's family and kept learning all the time.) And then there are also, of course, people who come with very little background. And as I'm now telling our daughter, who is teaching at Claremont--and finding some people who don't know anything--Well, see, that's a real opportunity for teaching [laughter]. Look how much they will learn. Well, some of mine have. One or two to an uncanny point.

I remember one student, a graduate student, doctoral candidate--and typically, in this case, Martin Malia was his director, but I was on his committee--he not only more or less learned everything I had to say, but what I was going to say.

Lage: Now that is uncanny.

Riasanovsky: Yes, it's uncanny. I was Russian history for him. He got his doctorate, he's a professor now; I don't even want to mention the name because it in a sense can be read as critical, but it's an example of a person coming with nothing and learning enormously.

Another said so, he went on and dedicated his book to me and so on. I have quite a number of people saying, "Without you I would never know about Russia," or what.

Lage: That's very gratifying.

Riasanovsky: It's interesting that people whom I did not teach say the same thing because of the textbook sometimes. I had a letter to that effect yesterday.

So there is this great range. Obviously, therefore, you adjust to the student.

Placing Ph.D.'s--The Changing Marketplace in Russian Studies

Lage: What role do you take in placing students?

Riasanovsky: There we try very hard. It's also a difficult business because as I said by now competent isn't enough; I mean, everyone is a genius. I again have been extremely fortunate because every student has been placed. Even in the worst days and so on. Evtukhov, when I told her that to cheer her up, said, "Well, I'll be your first unplaced student." But she got a fine job at Georgetown so she isn't.

Lage: Even the words--which I guess I used, but you use them too--"placing" as an active process, as opposed to the student "finding" a job.

Riasanovsky: The university has its procedures, generally good procedures. You write letters, you have dossiers, you have students who try to get jobs and have full support in terms of letters, evaluations, and so on. Usually it's also desirable to write a letter at that particular time. I tried to be as full and descriptive as possible without taking it to several pages. Perhaps I use somewhat fewer superlatives--

Lage: And hopefully the people who are reading them know your style.

Riasanovsky: Yes. I also have written very strongly for some people. Recently a person got a grant, but this was a remarkable person. Weeks, who--he got several grants; he always gets them. At one point I told him that I will restrict my letters for him to twelve a year [laughter]. But he wanted this time to be allowed to take intermediate Lithuanian in Vilnius during the summer. This was about his twenty-fourth language.

Lage: You're kidding!

Riasanovsky: No. Because he has that kind of facility.

Lage: Is this somebody current now? A graduate student?

Riasanovsky: No, he got his doctorate. I thought that with all his travels and languages it would take him long to get his doctorate. No, he has a facility for that, too. Then I wrote that I know only two people whom I would rate superior to him in languages: my former colleague, Franz Schurmann, who knew forty-some of them and without accent. And a great linguist of the University of Chicago. Well, you see, this is strong support; he got the grant. But it's still descriptive and proper support. I do not write that you must take him, he is the best. First of all, I don't know who is the best. I know very able people here; I don't know who are the very able people at Harvard or somewhere else. So I try to be reasonable and try to be down to earth.

Lage: Are there less formal things that go on? Do people call you up and say, "Now what do you really think?" or do you see them at meetings?

Riasanovsky: Yes, but there is no conspiracy.

Lage: [laughter] No, no, I wasn't thinking of that.

Riasanovsky: For instance, our own appointments, and let's say for certainly most good schools, enormously depend on what candidates have written.

Lage: The work that they've done.

Riasanovsky: Yes. Perhaps too much so, but for a good reason. You cannot judge teaching at this stage or perhaps at any stages. Berlin would fail as a teacher by standard judgment, and I'm not flippant about it. Teaching is obviously very important--you would be doing it all your life, for one thing. But unless one is, let's say, her voice doesn't carry but she's been trying to improve it--I mean, a real deficiency you can point to, you get sort of the standard complimentary remarks on teaching. Nothing is standard in writing; every piece is different from another. So the important thing again is their dissertations and what is sent in.

I'm very much in favor of the students themselves applying on their own. Obviously if they apply on their own, and a professor writes against them, their chances aren't good. But I am against the people in the profession--and some of them are good people and very well-meaning people and so on who say, "Well, this appointment is just right for him. And I think that he doesn't really want it." Let them decide what they want. But in addition to this sort of a freedom which I think is now officially endorsed, there is this fact that when people apply, you do not know what else the university wants. Everything is not spelled out. If you apply to a small college, and they see that they had a couple of courses in the Far East, and so they say, "Ah ha--the job's in Russian history. Well, look here, we also get the Far East." You don't know what they want entirely. So the more good candidates you can present the better.

I also try to talk to candidates--I do it informally. Zelnik, who is enormously devoted to his students, has even formal interviews--"as if" interviews and so on.

Lage: To prepare them.

Riasanovsky: Yes. I don't believe in artificial constructions, but of course I talk to them. One point to be made--let's take off on these Far Eastern courses. Some of our students in that situation would say, "I'm totally unprepared. Who am I to teach Far East without knowing Chinese, Japanese, Korean?" Of course, they're totally unprepared by our California standards; they obviously cannot replace Wakeman or Yeh, who comes from a high Mandarin Chinese background. But that's not what the small college wants. The small college simply wants a general introductory course, and that's legitimate. Why shouldn't people who come to college have a chance to learn something about China? So it's important to realize what the demands are, what the needs are, and there is nothing dishonorable about it.

Usually they do well; I had one person who went for an interview--again, I think Martin Malia was the director, and I was on the committee--and was asked to give a trial lecture. So he was going on, and some professor asked a question. He said, "You will keep quiet until I finish." [laughter]

Lage: A candidate?

Riasanovsky: Yes [laughter].

Lage: Well, he showed a great deal of confidence.

Riasanovsky: Yes. So occasionally such things happen.

Lage: Maybe he should have had the run-through with Zelnik.

Riasanovsky: Actually, yes. He probably would have told Zelnik to keep quiet. But that's unusual.

Things change; Maria, at some of her interviews, was asked--this was, by the way, by the Dominican School of Providence--"What percentage would you think your efforts should be research and what should teaching?"

Lage: Are you saying there is more interest in how someone teaches now than there used to be?

Riasanovsky: Oh, sure, tremendously. It's so good or bad that, for example, people should do some teaching before they apply; it will be a real handicap if they haven't. There used to be another way, that understandably the best fellowships were those that did not require teaching. For instance, I had a Rhodes scholarship which didn't require teaching. Now it's almost required to have a teaching statement--and I suppose if you don't have teaching experience, a very strong explanation of why.

Lage: So being a T.A. [teaching assistant] is necessary.

Riasanovsky: Yes, it's necessary, virtually.

Lage: Is there a change in demand for historians of Russia, or in grant support, since the end of the Cold War?

Riasanovsky: Yes, there's a change--many would say a disastrous change. I tend to be often more optimistic--change on several levels. For example, one of my colleagues recently argued that the worst of it is that the ablest people are not going into this field. For a while it was very much a premier field. Now they are interested in the Third World or ecology--

And the government gives much less money, the foundations give much less money.

Lage: So it's harder to get support for research or for student fellowships.

Riasanovsky: Yes, and visiting teaching, et cetera. No, it's drastic. That's how our society works. Of course, personally, I'm not affected in the sense that I didn't accept more than one hundred percent remuneration in retirement. One should sort of limit something. But the point is that people are affected by it, and the most unfortunate I would say are political science people who focused completely on the Soviet Union, because the subject isn't there. And it was the most central subject for our government.

Lage: Absolutely. Now it just doesn't exist. Overspecialized.

Riasanovsky: Yes. One reaction to it is now you should study post-Soviet states, and that is true. At the same time, no one is as afraid of Estonia as of the Soviet Union. The languages are very difficult, if they thought Russian difficult in most cases. This is really not a replacement.

But I'm not pessimistic partly because my work is not in the Soviet field, basically. But it is a very serious problem, a very serious problem in funds, and if correct--this is speculation--a very serious problem in the direction of our ablest people. They should study now Chinese or, as I say, ecology or whatever.

And it's interesting that to my mind--it certainly shouldn't to this extent, but it does affect many people. I was surprised, for example, some time ago when one of our greatest French specialists, my friend, my teacher, Gordon Wright, told me that if he were beginning now he would go into Russian history. I said, "Why?" He said, "Well, it's obviously central, obviously more important." I told him what happens to the history of Babylon then. I thought later a little more about it, and he did also important work as a cultural attaché in Paris, so he had government service; his secondary field was political science. But it was so strange for me to have someone who loves France, who is one of our very best specialists with enormous achievements and says, "Really I should have gone into Russia."

Martin Malia has the same trend. He always wants to know what is most important. I repeat, there would be no history if you studied only the most important things. It is part of the mentality, I'm afraid, of many people, even

where in my opinion it shouldn't be. I mean, obviously if you're interested in diplomatic service, you should know the appropriate languages. But if you're interested in the historic process, should we study only one country and then sort of dash to the next?

Lage: Why worry about what's "hot" at the moment?

Riasanovsky: I'm very sorry for people who have difficulty getting jobs and so on. I'm not minimizing that at all. But basically on this collapse of the Soviet Union--in addition to other wonderful qualities of that collapse I think that over a period of time what you need is stability and that's of course perhaps a big order--there will be more, not less, contacts. Who counts, for example, Americans who go to Rome or Paris? And we were counting each time in the Soviet exchange ten here, eleven there. So I think in the long run the field will certainly remain.

The American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies

Lage: Now I have one more area that you said wasn't terribly important, and that's professional organizations. You've been the longest-term president of the American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies. What's the importance of those groups?

Riasanovsky: This is our leading academic association and basically a very good one. Notice that it goes beyond history; for instance, a very large contingent is literature and languages, but then there are also economists, sociologists, and others. It sponsors annual meetings, sponsors our most important periodical, the *Slavic Review*--it was called the *American Slavic and East European Review* earlier. It's helpful to many people, but perhaps especially for people who are from small colleges, and they don't have colleagues in the Russian field. It gives prizes.

My being its longest president--which I would claim is my main mark in intellectual history since it's not likely to happen again--was because they couldn't settle on the constitution. They remained divided on the subject--"Please stay for another year." So I was president for three years,

1973-1976, whereas no one else occupied that office for more than one year.

Lage: Until it became resolved?

Riasanovsky: Yes. Until they could proceed. So I stayed. There were many things I remember. For example, we had an annual meeting, and at that point President [Gerald] Ford flew to Poland and said that Poland was a free country. I think I told you that story. I was a little shaken. But then I thought, Sure, he'll say next time--or some advisor will tell him to say--"I meant spiritually." Or "I meant culturally." No, he didn't. He said, "That's what they told me." [laughter]

And by that time everyone was talking about it, and we had a meeting--it was the annual meeting; I was president of it, presiding, and I wanted very much not to have a denunciation of the president's remark. So I was moving fast through the agenda and finally coming to its desired end, and several people kept raising their hands, and I disregarded them, closed the meeting. Several of them rushed to me and said, "Professor Riasanovsky, why did you do it? We wanted to move a vote of thanks to you." [laughter]

Another meeting, also memorable in its own way--the question is "Whom do we denounce? When do we protest?" And we finally agreed that we protest when academics are involved. So we protested the arrests in Czechoslovakia, we protested one arrest after another, and then someone moved about Ukrainians. I do not know what happened exactly--the society was tired; they voted against the motion [laughter]. So there was no protest concerning Ukrainians.

Lage: And you said that Ukrainians are very strong in the field of Slavic Studies.

Riasanovsky: Yes, but they also produce a reaction against them, obviously. In any case, there again the meeting closed, and several of them rushed to me, and one of them shouted, "I cannot stand this Anglo-Saxon domination of our organization!" And I said, "Do you mean me or Professor Erlich (the vice-president)?" [laughter] Erlich, as I mentioned earlier, was a Polish Jew; I obviously was not Anglo-Saxon [laughter].

But on the whole, it was and is a good organization.

Lage: Is it more politicized than most academic organizations?

Riasanovsky: Well, it's politicized as you can see from these examples, but I'd say less. At least we kept it not politicized, but if this was Anglo-Saxon or not, I don't know. We never moved, I guess, beyond protesting arrests of intellectuals--and even then, not Ukrainians.

Each year there is one person who always submits--you know, you submit panels to be approved. Year after year--I forgot which he is--Hungarian or Romanian; I think Hungarian, but I could be mistaken, and it's a drastic mistake. But anyhow, he each time wants to present a paper that Romanians are really the poison of the world. And we turned it down each single year [laughter]. So there's plenty of such feeling in the organization, but we managed.

There's an award for best book; I served on that committee, which again results in reading very good books. I still haven't--I didn't know where else to put them--here are three years of readings.

Lage: These three stacks here [gestures]?

Riasanovsky: Yes. One per year, and from that you select one. One of my graduate students said, "All that you got free." [laughter]

Lage: There's the perk.

Riasanovsky: Yes, right.

The association has some problems; there have been changes--people retire, people even die, and there are problems of exactly what particular moves the organization should take now and so on.

I have some other recollections; for example, I remember the question again was that we need more funds--we always do, but actually funding was good too.

Lage: Funds for your organization or for supporting scholars?

Riasanovsky: For travel, for support, for the field. One person at this executive committee meeting moved that we must explain to the government that you cannot remain a real scholar in the field unless you go to Russia at least once in five years. And I thought, Struve, [George] Florovsky, these are our best

people--I said, "No, no, we cannot say that." [laughter] But I remember I said it almost in a panic. So it was not ever used as an argument. But I do argue that it's very important for our students to go.

Lage: How has the government provided that kind of support?

Riasanovsky: There is for example a language program that supports learning languages. There is a travel program--IREX [International Research and Exchanges Board] is the exchange office; I know they have at least some government funds. It's not only government; it's at least government and foundations. The Ford Foundation has been very prominent.

One thing that scared me at one time when I was president, I discovered at that time headquarters were in Columbus, Ohio, at Ohio State University: a young and rather pleasant student there, a woman, could fake my signature perfectly. And I probably should keep track of where she is now [laughter]..

A Surprise Birthday and Festschrift

Lage: Tell me--I heard about your surprise seventieth birthday party a couple of years ago. Professor Zelnik told me about arranging this surprise.

Riasanovsky: Yes, yes. Well, that was very nice, and since this will not be public for at least a few weeks, I can say now that we are now trying to arrange one for him. And I would consider it impossible that he wouldn't notice, except that I was fooled, and I don't consider myself a fool [laughter]. So it occasionally can be done.

Lage: And did former students come from afar?

Riasanovsky: Yes, and there was a Festschrift. So it was very, very nice. And former students is very much to the point because, again, it varies--some of them I have been in close contact with, and some others I haven't seen for years. So it was a very good occasion indeed.

Lage: And how did they get you there?

Riasanovsky: Well, as they say--I think actually it was my son John who thought of it. I was to be gotten to the Faculty Club, so they phoned me and said that the bishop is waiting for you. Well, I come from a background where you don't let bishops wait [laughter]. You don't ask, "What bishop? Why?" Of course, it's not impossible either; you have every kind of visitor. So that's how I got to the Faculty Club.

That will not work with Zelnik--

##

Lage: That's coming up in a few weeks?

Riasanovsky: On the eighteenth of May. But as I say, he will not see this before that time. And his birthday should be especially marked because I don't know another person who is that caring and good with students. In fact, we have a different orientation--when the good students come in, as they do every year, I say, "How wonderful." He says, "But Nick, how are we going to place them?" [laughter] He starts right away and consistently. And he's really very happy if someone is placed and shaken if someone isn't. You sort of can see how he lives it. I somehow take it more in stride, I don't know.

Lage: And what's the occasion of his--is it a birthday?

Riasanovsky: Yes, I think he'll be sixty.

Lage: Young to have this kind of attention.

Riasanovsky: Yes, but I say more than deserved.

Thoughts on the Enormous Growth of Nationalism

Lage: Now tell me what we've missed in these ten sessions.

Riasanovsky: Nothing, nothing. I suppose there will be other interviews on other occasions perhaps now that I go to Russia. How are things going in the world and what do I think of that? And I believe in contemporary history; I don't believe in predicting for historians.

Lage: Even though you've been accused of doing it well.

Riasanovsky: Yes, yes. One point perhaps I should mention in that connection--perhaps I mentioned it earlier; we'll edit it--and this is enormous growth of nationalism. First of all, it's not surprising to a historian, for instance, that Croats will be killing Serbs. It's said that you cannot go by age-old hatreds, and I agree that you cannot go by age-old hatreds as the sole explanation. There's very much else to be considered. But the point is the hatreds do exist. I was asked by some nice lady to sign a statement, which of course I did not sign--I sign nothing about Serbs and Croats--because it began that Serbs always want to destroy Croats, and it was to be sent to Congress. And I said, "How about Croats destroying Serbs?" Because of course even now what happened in the Second World War, the destruction of Serbs was much worse numerically than what happened this time. She said, "Well, that was so long ago." I said, "Look--First, I'm a historian. Second, it's not so long ago because every family still remembers it."

But the broader picture--why all these nationality and independence movements and so on is a difficult and interesting one. And my guess is this--as, again, one factor, a speculative factor--that in spite of this being such a horrid century, and in some ways it's the worst century--counting people killed or whatever--there is a kind of a feeling--I don't know where it's from or exactly how it operates--that there will be law and order. And if there is law and order, people will want to live with people they consider their own. For example, if you take Russian history broadly speaking, how Russia grew has many explanations. It's comparable to Western expansion--many things can be said. One obvious thing is that it is Armenians and Georgians who wanted to be with the Russians, not the other way around. It took some time for Russia to acquire Armenia and Georgia.

Lage: But there was a move among Armenians and Georgians to be united to Russia?

Riasanovsky: Enormous. Not united, just saved from Persia and Turkey. But how do you get saved from Persia and Turkey? And the answer is, Where are the Turkish Armenians? They're all dead--those who didn't leave. But you see, if we have peace and order, why shouldn't there be Armenia and Georgia? Somehow you have this assumption, at the same time that you have a perfectly dreadful century.

That, by the way, does not mean that everything will be fine, because for one thing look at Nagorny Karabakh or whatever you want to look at. Almost all the groups do not agree on boundaries. Basques are a unique group--why not have a Basque land? But if you look at the boundaries it's difficult, because they also claim provinces where they're minorities in northern Spain, southern France, etcetera. So I'm not saying this is an easy solution. But I definitely feel that somehow that feeling is based on assumed security.

Lage: So the condition of law and order contributes to the nationalistic tendencies?

Riasanovsky: Yes. And also both the condition and the belief in that condition. There may be less condition than belief.

I'm also, in this connection, very much in the favor of criminal prosecution for war crimes. That's relatively new and extremely desirable, whether it's Serbs, Croats, Muslims --all deserve it, I mean, to speak broadly. Even if you say you will not catch them, you don't know where they are, the very existence of it is a very desirable factor.

Lage: And will regulate behavior to a degree?

Riasanovsky: Yes. So these are some of the things on my mind.

Did I tell you the story of my being asked to be expert on a TV series on Peter the Great?

Lage: No, when was this?

Riasanovsky: Several years ago. It was a dreadful series, although Arlene found it exciting with all the boyar costumes and so on. I turned it down for two reasons: the main reason was that I was not the specialist they needed. For instance, you need the real technical specialist who could come into the room and say, "This isn't seventeenth century furniture." I don't begin to have that kind of competence; and I had much else to do.

They invited me two or three times; I don't know why I was so needed. Perhaps because this was an English production to begin with, and my books--especially *The Image of Peter the Great*--were popular in England. But in any case, all this time they kept sending me internal memoranda. Now this all may now be published as a book and well-known, but to me they were new, and there were interesting things.

One thing asked by the director of each actor was, "What do you think is your most difficult task and the most difficult task of this program?" And Vanessa Redgrave of all people played Sophia. The historic Sophia was built like a barrel. This Sophia was a renaissance princess. Vanessa Redgrave is supposedly very aware politically. She wrote, "The most difficult thing for us will be to picture those barbaric times in our civilized century." And I thought, There will always be an England.

But you see, civilized century or not, there is a hope, I think, that there will be some law and order and that's part of the picture of all these people coming from behind the wall or out of prisons or what to claim their states. Don't you think, for example, what is a Kurd state going to be like if we have one?

Lage: The actualities of it are just incredibly complicated.

Riasanovsky: I'm glad that I'm too old to be sent as a peacekeeping force.

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APPENDIX

Curriculum Vitae, 1993, Nicholas V. Riasanovsky

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Curriculum Vitae

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Personal Data: Born December 21, 1923, in Harbin, China; son of Valentine Alexandrovich and Antonina Fedorovna (Podgorinova) Riasanovsky; married Arlene Schlegel, February 15, 1955; children: John, Nicholas, Maria.

Education: B.A., University of Oregon, 1942
 A.M., Harvard University, 1947
 D.Phil, Oxford University, 1949

Religion: Eastern Orthodox.

Teaching:
State University of Iowa, Iowa City, 1949-57
University of California, Berkeley, 1957-. Sidney Hellman Ehrman Professor of European History since 1969
Lectured since 1969 at perhaps two dozen leading American universities, academic and other learned societies (especially in the Soviet Union but also in several other countries)
Has at present invitations to lectures and conferences in a number of countries and American universities some of them are special endowed occasions.

Military Service:
U.S. Army, became Second Lieutenant
Awarded Bronze Star Medal and four campaign stars

Member:
American Historical Association
President, American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies, 1973-77
Board of Trustees, National Council for Soviet and East European Research, 1980-82
Member, Academic Council of Kennan Institute for Advanced Russian Studies
American Academy of Arts and Sciences

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Editor:

California Slavic Studies, 1960-
Simvol (honorary), 1988-

Past and Present Board:

Russian Review (governing and editorial)
 President, Western Slavic Association, 1988-89
 Advisory board member, Abstracts of Soviet and East European Emigré Periodical Literature

Board, National Council for Soviet and East European Research
 Editorial Board, Encyclopaedia Britannica, Russian edition, 1992-

Recent and Present Committees:

Vice Chair of Coordinating Committee on Graduate Affairs (CCGA), 1989
 Committee on Joint Graduate Work of UC and State Universities and Colleges Committee
 dealing with graduate student report
 Member, Mabelle McLeod Lewis Memorial Foundation Fellowship Committee
 Academic Council, The Kennan Institute for Advanced Russian Studies, Woodrow Wilson
 International Center for Scholars, Washington, D.C., 1988
 Board of Trustee of the Patriarch Athenagoras Orthodox Institute at the Graduate
 Theological Union, Berkeley, CA
 Member of the Library Committee, St. Vladimir's Orthodox Theological Seminary,
 Crestwood, N.Y.
 Numerous departmental committees
 Member of Title VIII Selection Committee, Hoover Institution, 1992

Accomplishments, Awards and Honors:

Rhodes Scholar, 1947-49
 Fulbright Grantee, 1954-55
 Sidney Hellman Ehrman Professor of European History, 1969-
 Guggenheim Fellow, 1969-70
 Senior Fellow, National Endowment for the Humanities, 1975
 Fulbright Senior Scholar, 1979
 Commonwealth Club of San Francisco Silver Medal for History of Russia
 IREX Fellow several times
 Bernard Moses lecture, 1983
 Fellow, Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences, 1984-85
 1985 Selection of The Image of Peter the Great in Russian History and Thought by the
 History Book Club
 1987 elected to American Academy of Arts and Sciences

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Webfoot Distinguished Alumnus Award, presented by University of Oregon, College of Arts and Sciences, 1988
1989 recognized by University of California for participation in the First Annual Educational Leadership Institute, June 25-30, Santa Barbara, CA
Fellow, The Wilson Center, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 1989-90
1993 American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies (AAASS) Distinguished Contributor Award
Other grants and endowed lectureships, etc.
Other presidencies and academic offices

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MULTI-INTERVIEWEE PROJECTS

Blake Estate Oral History Project. 1988, 582 pp.

Architects landscape architects, gardeners, presidents of UC document the history of the UC presidential residence. Includes interviews with Mai Arbegast, Igor Blake, Ron and Myra Brocchini, Toichi Domoto, Eliot Evans, Tony Hail, Linda Haymaker, Charles Hitch, Flo Holmes, Clark and Kay Kerr, Gerry Scott, George and Helena Thacher, Walter Vodden, and Norma Willer.

Centennial History Project, 1954-1960. 329 pp.

Includes interviews with George P. Adams, Anson Stiles Blake, Walter C. Blasdale, Joel H. Hildebrand, Samuel J. Holmes, Alfred L. Kroeber, Ivan M. Linforth, George D. Louderback, Agnes Fay Morgan, and William Popper. (Bancroft Library use only.)

Thomas D. Church, Landscape Architect. Two volumes, 1978, 803 pp.

Volume I: Includes interviews with Theodore Bernardi, Lucy Butler, June Meehan Campbell, Louis De Monte, Walter Doty, Donn Emmons, Floyd Gerow, Harriet Henderson, Joseph Howland, Ruth Jaffe, Burton Litton, Germano Milano, Miriam Pierce, George Rockrise, Robert Royston, Geraldine Knight Scott, Roger Sturtevant, Francis Violich, and Harold Watkin.

Volume II: Includes interviews with Maggie Baylis, Elizabeth Roberts Church, Robert Glasner, Grace Hall, Lawrence Halprin, Proctor Mellquist, Everitt Miller, Harry Sanders, Lou Schenone, Jack Stafford, Goodwin Steinberg, and Jack Wagstaff.

Interviews with Dentists. (Dental History Project, University of California, San Francisco.) 1969, 1114 pp. Includes interviews with Dickson Bell, Reuben L. Blake, Willard C. Fleming, George A. Hughes, Leland D. Jones, George F. McGee, C. E. Rutledge, William B. Ryder, Jr., Herbert J. Samuels, Joseph Sciutto, William S. Smith, Harvey Stallard, George E. Steninger, and Abraham W. Ward. (Bancroft Library use only.)

Julia Morgan Architectural History Project. Two volumes, 1976, 621 pp.

Volume I: *The Work of Walter Steilberg and Julia Morgan, and the Department of Architecture, UCB, 1904-1954.*

Includes interviews with Walter T. Steilberg, Robert Ratcliff, Evelyn Paine Ratcliff, Norman L. Jensen, John E. Wagstaff, George C. Hodges, Edward B. Hussey, and Warren Charles Perry.

Julia Morgan Architectural History Project.

Volume II: *Julia Morgan, Her Office, and a House.*

Includes interviews with Mary Grace Barron, Kirk O. Rowlands, Norma Willer, Quintilla Williams, Catherine Freeman Nimitz, Polly Lawrence McNaught, Hettie Belle Marcus, Bjarne Dahl, Bjarne Dahl, Jr., Morgan North, Dorothy Wormser Coblenz, and Flora d'Ille North.

The Prytaneans: An Oral History of the Prytanean Society and its Members. (Order from Prytanean Society.)

Volume I: 1901-1920, 1970, 307 pp.

Volume II: 1921-1930, 1977, 313 pp.

Volume III: 1931-1935, 1990, 343 pp.

Six Weeks in Spring, 1985: Managing Student Protest at UC Berkeley.

887 pp. Transcripts of sixteen interviews conducted during July-August 1985 documenting events on the UC Berkeley campus in April-May 1985 and administration response to student activities protesting university policy on investments in South Africa.

Interviews with: Ira Michael Heyman, chancellor; Watson Laetsch, vice chancellor; Roderic Park, vice chancellor; Ronald Wright, vice chancellor; Richard Hafner, public affairs officer; John Cummins and Michael R. Smith, chancellor's staff; Patrick Hayashi and B. Thomas Travers, undergraduate affairs; Mary Jacobs, Hal Reynolds, and Michelle Woods, student affairs; Derry Bowles, William Foley, Joseph Johnson, and Ellen Stetson, campus police. (Bancroft Library use only.)

Robert Gordon Sproul Oral History Project. Two volumes, 1986, 904 pp.

Includes interviews with Horace Albright, Stuart LeRoy Anderson, Katherine Bradley, Dyke Brown, Natalie Cohen, Paul A. Dodd, May Dornin, Richard E. Erickson, Walter S. Frederick, David P. Gardner, Vernon Goodin, Marion Sproul Goodin, Louis Heilbron, Clark Kerr, Adrian Kragen, Robert S. Johnson, Mary Blumer Lawrence, Donald McLaughlin, Dean McHenry, Stanley E. McCaffrey, Kendric and Marion Morrish, William Penn Mott, Jr., Herman Phleger, John B. deC. M. Saunders, Carl Sharsmith, John Sproul, Robert Gordon Sproul, Jr., Wallace Sterling, Wakefield Taylor, Robert Underhill, Garff Wilson, and Pete L. Yzaquирre.

The University of California during the Presidency of David P. Gardner, 1983-1992. (In process.)

Interviews with members of the university community and state government officials.

The Women's Faculty Club of the University of California at Berkeley, 1919-1982. 1983, 312 pp.

Includes interviews with Josephine Smith, Margaret Murdock, Agnes Robb, May Dornin, Josephine Miles, Gudveig Gordon-Britland, Elizabeth Scott, Marian Diamond, Mary Ann Johnson, Eleanor Van Horn, and Katherine Van Valer Williams.

UC BERKELEY BLACK ALUMNI ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Broussard, Allen. *A California Supreme Court Justice Looks at Law and Society, 1969-1996.* 1997, 266 pp.

Ferguson, Lloyd Noel. *Increasing Opportunities in Chemistry, 1936-1986.* 1992, 74 pp.

Gordon, Walter A. *Athlete, Officer in Law Enforcement and Administration, Governor of the Virgin Islands.* Two volumes, 1980, 621 pp. Vol. I \$82; Vol. II

Jackson, Ida. *Overcoming Barriers in Education.* 1990, 80 pp.

Patterson, Charles. *Working for Civic Unity in Government, Business, and Philanthropy.* 1994, 220 pp.

Pittman, Tarea Hall. *NAACP Official and Civil Rights Worker.* 1974, 159 pp.

Poston, Marvin. *Making Opportunities in Vision Care.* 1989, 90 pp.

Rice, Emmett J. *Education of an Economist: From Fulbright Scholar to the Federal Reserve Board, 1951-1979.* 1991, 92 pp.

Rumford, William Byron. *Legislator for Fair Employment, Fair Housing, and Public Health.* 1973, 152 pp.

Williams, Archie. *The Joy of Flying: Olympic Gold, Air Force Colonel, and Teacher.* 1993, 85 pp.

Wilson, Lionel. *Attorney, Judge, Oakland Mayor.* 1992, 104 pp.

UC BERKELEY CLASS OF 1931 ENDOWMENT SERIES, UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA,
SOURCE OF COMMUNITY LEADERS (OUTSTANDING ALUMNI)

Bennett, Mary Woods (class of 1931). *A Career in Higher Education: Mills College 1935-1974.* 1987, 278 pp.

Bridges, Robert L. (class of 1930). (In process.) *Career in Law*

Browne, Alan K. (class of 1931). "Mr. Municipal Bond": *Bond Investment Management, Bank of America, 1929-1971.* 1990, 325 pp.

Dettner, Ann Degruchy Low-Beer (class of 1926). *A Woman's Place in Science and Public Affairs, 1932-1973.* 1996, 260 pp.

Devlin, Marion (class of 1931). *Women's News Editor: Vallejo Times-Herald, 1931-1978.* 1991, 157 pp.

Hassard, H. Howard (class of 1931). *The California Medical Association, Medical Insurance, and the Law, 1935-1992.* 1993, 228 pp.

Heilbron, Louis (class of 1928). *Most of a Century: Law and Public Service, 1930s to 1990s.* 1995, 397 pp.

Kay, Harold (class of 1931). *A Berkeley Boy's Service to the Medical Community of Alameda County, 1935-1994.* 1994, 104 pp.

Kraken, Adrian A. (class of 1931). *A Law Professor's Career: Teaching, Private Practice, and Legislative Representative, 1934 to 1989.* 1991, 333 pp.

Peterson, Rudolph (class of 1925). *A Career in International Banking with the Bank of America, 1936-1970, and the United Nations Development Program, 1971-1975.* 1994, 408 pp.

Stripp, Fred S. Jr. (class of 1932). *University Debate Coach, Berkeley Civic Leader, and Pastor.* 1990, 75 pp.

Trefethen, Eugene (class of 1930). *Kaiser Industries, Trefethen Vineyards, the University of California, and Mills College, 1926-1997.* 1997, 189 pp.

UC BERKELEY ALUMNI DISCUSS THE UNIVERSITY

Griffiths, Farnham P. (class of 1906). *The University of California and the California Bar.* 1954, 46 pp.

Ogg, Robert Danforth (class of 1941). *Business and Pleasure: Electronics, Anchors, and the University of California.* 1989, 157 pp.

Olney, Mary McLean (class of 1895). *Oakland, Berkeley, and the University of California, 1880-1895.* 1963, 173 pp.

Selvin, Herman F. (class of 1924). *The University of California and California Law and Lawyers, 1920-1978.* 1979, 217 pp.

Shurtleff, Roy L. (class of 1912). *The University's Class of 1912, Investment Banking, and the Shurtleff Family History.* 1982, 69 pp.

Stewart, Jessie Harris (class of 1914). *Memories of Girlhood and the University.* 1978, 70 pp.

Witter, Jean C. (class of 1916). *The University, the Community, and the Lifeblood of Business.* 1968, 109 pp.

DONATED ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

Almy, Millie. *Reflections of Early Childhood Education: 1934-1994.* 1997, 89 pp.

Cal Band Oral History Project. An ongoing series of interviews with Cal Band members and supporters of Cal spirit groups. (University Archives, Bancroft Library use only.)

Crooks, Afton E. *On Balance, One Woman's Life and View of University of California Management, 1954-1990: An Oral History Memoir of the Life of Afton E. Crooks.* 1994, 211 pp.

Weaver, Harold F. *Harold F. Weaver, California Astronomer.* 1993, 165 pp.

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